Framing international conflicts: Media coverage of fighting in the Middle East

ABSTRACT
Media framing of foreign conflicts determines the way in which the public and policy-makers perceive the causes, consequences and importance of those conflicts and where diplomatic and material resources are committed. Framing is manifested in, among other things, the amount of media coverage of a particular conflict and the language used to describe the actors and events in that conflict. The type of framing employed determines whether the public will empathize with one of the sides involved or feel detached from events taking place far from them. This article builds on earlier research on media framing through a study of two foreign conflicts that had a number of key similarities but were framed very differently. Framing is analysed through a comparison of New York Times coverage of army sieges of two Palestinian refugee camps: the first in the town of Jenin in the West Bank in 2002 and the second in Nahr al-Bared in Lebanon in 2007. The research examines the depth of coverage and the language used to portray the context of events, the two armies, combatants within the camps, civilian casualties, damage to property and the effectiveness of the military operations. Analysis of differences in the reporting of these two conflicts expands on existing literature on media framing, discusses causes of inconsistent framing and elucidates the effect of framing on perceptions of reality in foreign conflict and the subsequent effect on policy-making.

KEYWORDS
Media framing
Middle East
Israel
Lebanon
Palestinians
United Nations
foreign policy
New York Times
INTRODUCTION

Readers of elite publications, such as the New York Times, may consider themselves well informed about the most important issues and events around the world. Upon finishing a clear, well-constructed article, readers form opinions on the causes, actors and significance of the events reported. However, the apparently factual news items presented to the public often lead the public to understand events from a particular perspective, or frame, advanced by the media. The effect of this framing can be far more powerful than the opinions expressed in editorial columns. Media framing affects government decision-making both directly, by supplying information to decision-makers, and indirectly, through public opinion (Entman 2004; Soroka 2003).

This article examines media framing of international conflicts through in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis of reporting of two Middle East conflicts. This work builds on a growing body of research on media framing and its effect on public opinion and public policy, especially as it affects international affairs.

FRAMING

The media’s choices, as to which stories to cover and which facts to include, demand a certain amount of discretion. Consequently, news reporting entails ‘framing’, ‘the process by which a communication source constructs and defines a social or political issue for its audience’ (Nelson et al. 1997: 221). Frames help organize concise and coherent news summaries (Nelson et al. 1997). Research on framing elucidates the ways in which media reports select and highlight particular elements of an issue in the process of bringing it to the public (Entman 2000).

In organizing an article around certain ideas or themes, particular aspects or angles are emphasized and made more ‘salient’ (Dimitrova et al. 2005). Making a subject or image more prominent in a news report gives it ‘an identifiable slant’ (Bloch-Elkon 2007: 25). Whether an item appears on the front page of a newspaper or at the opening of a television news broadcast, is placed in the lead or buried in a later paragraph, reflects the importance which the media attribute to an issue and subsequently affects its significance for the public (Cohen 1997) and often determines whether the public perceives the information positively or negatively (Druckman 2004; Nelson and Oxley 1999). Hence, Barker-Plummer (1995: 308) characterizes news discourse as ‘an authoritative version of reality, a way of knowing…’. Recent research offers greater insight on media framing’s influence on the public’s opinions about news events.

Media framing is especially important in shaping the public’s and decision-makers’ knowledge of the world (Bloch-Elkon 2007; Nelson et al. 1997). Policy-makers, like the public, depend on media reports for most of their information about world events, as well as for understanding public opinion on these events (Bloch-Elkon 2007; Entman 2000).

The effects of framing have been studied in communications, psychology and political science (Nelson et al. 1997). Various researches have analysed news framing’s effects on public opinion, election campaigns and policy development (Druckman 2001b; Esser and D’Angelo 2006: 44; Nelson and Oxley 1999). For example, Druckman (2004: 671) shows how ‘different, but logically equivalent, words or phrases cause individuals to alter their preferences’ on policy issues.
FRAMING AND FOREIGN POLICY

A number of researchers have examined the connection between media framing of international news, public opinion and the effect on US foreign policy agenda. Studies have marked a change in media coverage of international news since the end of the Cold War. The disappearance, after half a century, of the clearly structured conflict between the West and the communist East left a void in analysts’ attributions of the causes of international conflicts. According to Bloch-Elkon (2007: 23): ‘It appears that the media have attempted to fill the vacuum by searching for a suitable new framework in which to report events…’. This search has led some journalists to seek frames for ‘problem definitions, causes, moral judgements and remedies that fall into consistent pattern and yield consistent meaning’ (Entman 2000: 14). As a result, foreign leaders who are at odds with US foreign policy, such as Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein, have been demonized by media that portray them as evil incarnate (Brewer 2006; Dimitrova et al. 2005; Nelson et al. 1997).

The degree to which the public perceives foreign leaders as evil and empathizes with those they are taking action against depends largely on media framing. Certain framing leads the public to feel a closer ‘proximity’, and identify with one side or group in a conflict. Conversely, coverage emphasizing the complexity of a conflict or characterizing it as a long-standing feud between ethnic groups creates a feeling of ‘distance’ between the audience and the victims (Robinson 2002). The degree of empathy in media framing is key to the public’s and policy-makers’ understanding and opinion of various conflicts.

Such framing has influenced decision-makers directly and indirectly, through its influence on public opinion, affecting the US government’s decisions to enter conflicts in Somalia, Kosovo and both Gulf Wars (Bloch-Elkon 2007; Brewer 2006; Dimitrova et al. 2005). Similarly, framing of other conflicts has led to decisions not to become involved in those countries’ affairs.

International media coverage focuses on certain key countries (Hess 1996). As budgetary concerns have reduced the number of foreign correspondents in recent years (Carroll 2006), journalists often have to cover more than one country. The demand for coverage of breaking stories has led to reporters jumping between war zones. These correspondents have been dubbed ‘parachutists’, who drop in on violent conflicts, or ‘firemen’ rushing between hot spots (Hess 1996). Thus, world news is increasingly framed by action-seeking correspondents with little in-depth knowledge of the regions or conflicts they are covering.

In that context, there has been disproportionate coverage of the conflict-ridden Middle East. It received 35 per cent of American foreign news television coverage in the early 1990s, despite accounting for only 5 per cent of the world’s population (Hess 1996). In 2006, the three main American television networks’ foreign news focused on the Middle East more than on any other region (Lobe 2007).

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

This research compares media framing of two Middle East conflicts that were chronologically and logistically very similar. In both cases a regular standing army surrounded a Palestinian refugee camp with the objective of rooting out armed militants. In both cases the army’s operation led to casualties and large-scale property damage. Despite the similarities, media framing of the conflicts was very different.
BACKGROUND

1. Jenin
Following the failed Camp David summit in 2000, a wave of violence spread over Israel and the Palestinian territories in the Second Intifada. Palestinian suicide attacks targeting Israeli civilian buses, shopping centres and restaurants were followed by Israeli army reprisals. At the end of March 2002, two massive suicide bombings, in the Israeli cities of Netanya and Haifa, killed a combined 45 people. The Netanya bombing was especially shocking for Israelis, as it targeted people at a traditional Passover meal in a hotel dining room. Public outcry pressured the Israeli government to take action (Schmemann 2002: April 4).

A refugee camp adjacent to the West Bank city of Jenin was identified as a main base of operations for organizations sending the bombers. The camp, established by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in 1953, had grown to approximately 15,000, with multi-storey buildings and urban infrastructure.

In early April 2002, the Israeli Army surrounded the Jenin camp in pursuit of the militias responsible for the bombings and called for civilians to leave the area. Several thousand fled, though hundreds chose to remain. On 3 April, army forces entered a densely built area of the camp where they met and fought hundreds of armed militiamen who had laid hundreds of mines and booby traps (UN 2002). Stating a desire to minimize civilian casualties, soldiers fought house to house rather than use air strikes or artillery bombardments (UN 2002: 12). On 9 April, thirteen Israeli soldiers were killed when a booby-trapped building collapsed on them (Brinkley, 10 April). At that point the army bulldozed a swath of buildings to allow troops to enter more safely (UN 2002: 12). On 14 April the fighting ended, the remaining Palestinian fighters surrendered and the Israeli army took full control of the camp.

The UN reported 52 Palestinians and 23 Israeli troops killed, 150 buildings destroyed, with many others damaged, and approximately 435 families left homeless (UN 2002).

2. Nahr al-Bared
Five years later fighting erupted around the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, 135 miles (215 km) north of Jenin, near the Mediterranean port of Tripoli in Lebanon. Nahr al-Bared was also established by UNRWA, in 1950, and by 2007 had grown to 31,000, with urban infrastructure and multi-storey apartment buildings.

Fighting began on 20 May 2007, when Lebanese police tried to arrest a member of a Palestinian militia known as Fatah al-Islam following a bank robbery in Tripoli. The militia fighters resisted and dozens of militiamen, Lebanese army troops and civilians were killed in two days of fighting. The Lebanese army surrounded the camp and most of the camp’s residents fled.

Fighting between the army and militia fighters lasted more than three months. The army bombarded the camp with helicopters and artillery, employing emergency arms shipments from the United States and Europe. By the time fighting ended, on 2 September, 169 Lebanese soldiers and 287 militants had been killed, along with 42 civilians. According to a UNRWA report, the fighting left 85 per cent of the camp’s infrastructure fully or partially destroyed and 30,000 homeless (UNRWA 2007b).
RESEARCH DESIGN

Clearly, no conflicts are identical and these cases, while similar, have their differences. For example, the Jenin fighting occurred on territory widely considered by the international community to be controlled by an occupying army, while the treatment of Palestinians in Lebanon is seen by most as an internal matter for that country. That said, the geographic and logistic similarities of these two incidents – standing armies besieging militants in a UNRWA camp – provide a useful context in which to investigate media framing.

This research employs both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in analysing framing of the two conflicts, as reported in approximately 80 *New York Times* articles during the two conflicts. The *New York Times* is one of the main news sources for political elites in the United States and its influence is felt worldwide. The *New York Times*’ impact on decision-makers is even greater for international affairs (Bloch-Elkon 2007), as it together with the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post* have more foreign correspondents than all other American newspapers combined (Carroll 2006).

Framing, according to Entman (2004: 23), takes place in three aspects of reporting: political events, issues and actors. Entman’s model illustrates the function of framing in defining the effects of a problem or condition, identifying its causes, endorsing a remedy and conveying a moral judgement (2004: 24). This work takes a similar approach, analysing the content of media reports of these two conflicts in terms of the events that took place, the actors involved and the moral judgement conveyed. To this end, framing of each conflict is analysed in six categories:

- Depth of media coverage
- Characterization of the army besieging the camp
- Characterization of the fighters inside the camp
- Effect of fighting on the civilian residents of the camp
- Reporting of damage caused by the fighting
- Analysis of the effectiveness and utility of the armies’ operations

The first category utilizes a quantitative comparison of the amount of coverage for each conflict relative to the length of fighting and the number of casualties. The next four categories focus on framing of the actors in each conflict. The second and third categories analyse framing of combatants in the two conflicts, while the fourth and fifth categories focus on framing of civilians, and their property, directly affected by the fighting. Finally, the last category corresponds to Entman’s function of ‘conveying moral judgement’, examining framing of the utility of the two military campaigns.

DEPTH OF MEDIA COVERAGE

Jenin

Fighting in the Jenin refugee camp lasted only 12 days. Yet during this period there were approximately 50 *New York Times* items with references to Jenin, among which 36 were news articles – an average of 3.0 per day. Most of the articles were written by leading veteran *New York Times* correspondents. Many of the articles did not focus exclusively on events in Jenin, only mentioning it in the context of fighting across the West Bank or in coverage of other suicide bombings in...
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<th></th>
<th>Jenin</th>
<th>Lebanon</th>
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<tr>
<td>Period of time (days)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>107</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of soldiers killed</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>169</td>
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<td>Number of Palestinian fighters killed</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>287</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of civilians killed</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>42</td>
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<td>Number of civilians displaced</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total articles (w/o opinion or summary)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average articles per day during conflict</td>
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<td>0.2</td>
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<td>Average article length in words</td>
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<tr>
<td>Articles with fewer than 500 words</td>
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Table 1: Depth of coverage – summary of conflicts’ coverage.

Israeli cities during this period. Several articles focused on diplomatic efforts to end the fighting. Articles averaged 1192 words, with two-thirds more than 1000 words in length (see Table 1).

**Nahr al-Bared**

During the 107 days of fighting in Nahr al-Bared there were 26 *NY Times* items mentioning that conflict, of which 21 were news articles – an average of 0.2 per day. The vast majority of stories were written by two Lebanese journalists. Many of the articles connected the fighting in Nahr al-Bared to other turmoil in Lebanon, including bombings in Beirut. Articles averaged 760 words, with a majority less than 1000 words, and almost one-third less than 500 words.

Thus, despite geographic and logistic similarities, depth of coverage was not at all similar, with articles on Jenin submitted by higher-profile correspondents, substantially longer and 15 times more frequent.

**CHARACTERIZATION OF THE ARMIES BESIEGING THE CAMPS**

**Jenin**

Details of the army’s advanced weapons are a key part of the framing of the fighting in Jenin. Tanks and helicopter gunships are mentioned in almost every report. There are descriptions of artillery, cannons, missiles and armoured bulldozers. A 10th April article refers to ‘an armada of tanks and armored personnel carriers’. This same article states ‘Israeli patrols and armored vehicles have maintained ruthless curfews’. An 11th April article states that Prime Minister Sharon ‘unleashed Israeli forces’ (Schmemann). That same day, another article says:

In an overwhelming display of force within easy sight of Jenin, dozens of Israeli armored vehicles and tanks waited in a camp gouged out of the hillside. (Bennet)
Even the creation of the army camp (‘gouged’) sounds violent. The same article tells readers:

> Israel has been using the antiaircraft weapons, capable of shooting 3,000 20-millimeter rounds a minute, to pulverize houses containing gunmen.

Articles the following day continue to detail the army’s equipment. On 13 April, interviews with camp residents describe army bulldozers: ‘scooping bodies up, cutting bodies in half and loading bodies onto trucks’ (Bennet). On 14 April, the last day of fighting, one article’s lead describes: ‘Israeli machine-gun fire still slicing through the sour smell of tear gas in the air’ (Bennet). Another article in the same edition tells how:

> Children had collected spent cartridges, some, from helicopter machine guns, the size of cans of frozen juice concentrate. A grenade pin lay in the dust, not far from a missile’s steel fins. (Bennet)

**Nahr al-Bared**

In the Nahr al-Bared fighting, description of the army’s weapons is limited, less descriptive and usually given in the context of fighting a heavily armed enemy. For example, a 2nd June article tells how ‘Army artillery took aim at sniper perches’. While no first-hand accounts of heavy weaponry are provided, the article states that Lebanese television:

> showed Russian T-55 tanks, French-made Panhard tanks and American-built armored personnel carriers moving closer to the camp, some saddled with sandbags for protection.

Thus, the tanks (no ‘armada’) here needed protection. One interesting aspect of reports from Lebanon is the repeated characterization of the army as a unifying force and the saviour of the country, which is enthusiastically supported by all the country’s citizens. In the first article on the fighting, on 21 May, it is reported that:

> Many residents of Tripoli welcomed the army into town, and onlookers clapped whenever tanks fired shells into the camp.

On 20 June, an article titled ‘Army provides a sense of unity in fractured Lebanon’ describes mourning at the funeral of a soldier killed in the fighting, stating ‘Political forces from all over the country have rallied around the army’. Ten days later, army troops opened fire on Palestinian demonstrators trying to get into their former homes in the besieged refugee camp, killing 2 and wounding 30. The article repeats assertions from the state-run national news agency, that the soldiers first tried deterring the demonstrators by firing into the air. The article then states: ‘Lebanese civilians interfered to support the army, engaging in fistfights with the Palestinians.’

Finally, the 3rd September article reporting the end of fighting shows a picture of a soldier being carried on a civilian’s shoulders. According to the article:
The militants’ failed last stand has burnished the image of the army, which is viewed by Lebanese across the political spectrum as the only institution in the country that represents the state, not individual factions.

Despite the prolonged fighting and deaths on both sides, the army has won widespread praise and support for its restraint in a nation that has seen its share of violent clashes.

The article describes the army’s commander-in-chief as a national hero and quotes a Lebanese professor as saying ‘The army is emerging as the guardian of the state of Lebanon’.

FIGHTERS INSIDE THE CAMPS

Jenin

Reports of combatants on the other side, the Palestinian militants, were framed substantially differently from the army they were fighting. During the Jenin fighting, there were a limited number of vague references to the militants. On several occasions, as background to the fighting, assertions that the militants are linked to the suicide bombings that preceded the fighting are almost always modified with phrases such as ‘Israel says’ or ‘Israel claims’.

Most reports do not mention the militants fighting the army. Rare mention of the militants’ weapons is contrasted with Israeli weapons to highlight the framing of a strong side attacking a weaker one. For example, preceding a description of advanced army weaponry, an 11th April article asserts:

The Palestinians have no military aircraft. They have been fighting mostly with semiautomatic rifles, homemade explosives and some mass-produced explosives like antitank weapons. (Bennet)

A report the next day states:

The Palestinians, armed with semiautomatic rifles and improvised explosives, were hopelessly outgunned by Israeli troops backed up by helicopter gunships, tanks and antiaircraft guns. (Bennet)

Similarly, an article on 14 April, after describing the remains of American TOW missiles fired by the Israelis, states that both sides say ‘Palestinian fighters had salted the camp with booby traps’ (Bennet).

No elaborations are given of this ‘salting’ (which had killed thirteen soldiers five days prior) and the article turns back to describing destruction caused by the army’s weapons. Perhaps one of the most vivid characterizations that fit into a framing of an unbalanced battle is the above-mentioned 14th April article, which seems to question if there were armed militants:

Israel says that its soldiers were careful to avoid shooting civilians, and that most of the dead were fighters. Residents of the camp said many civilians were killed. Two bodies were seen here today . . .

In both cases, no weapons were seen, but one clip from a Kalashnikov rifle, dropped or placed there, lay to each body’s right. A public relations struggle is under way over this ruined place. (Bennet)
The juxtaposition of ‘no weapons’, bullets ‘placed’ next to the bodies and a ‘public relations struggle’ seems to imply a staging where civilians were killed and bullets planted as a cover-up.

One of the most interesting references to the fighting from the militants’ side in the battles was a 12th April article in which Jenin was described as ‘a fortress of Palestinian resistance that has crumbled before overwhelming Israeli force’ (Bennet). A 13th April article states that Jenin:

has become a symbol of defiance to Palestinians and Arabs abroad... and Israeli bulldozers leveled large swaths of the refugee camp to crush the resistance. (Schmemann)

One of the few cases in which Palestinian fighters are mentioned is a 14th April article which describes the destruction in the aftermath of the fighting:

In a dark corner of the room, leaning against the cinder-block wall and silently watching the children play, sat a surviving fighter of the Palestinian resistance, in hiding. His face was a web of black burns. Blisters the size of quarters dotted his blackened left hand. His left leg was scorched. He had watched three comrades die in the grenade attack that wounded him, he said. ‘We didn’t expect them to use such military force’, he said, though insisting he had no regrets. (Bennet)

This description makes this militia fighter benign and even perhaps piteous. Terms such as ‘defy’ or ‘resist’ indicate a reactive action (as opposed to ‘attack’ or ‘fight’). Throughout the conflict, characterizations of Palestinians ‘defying’ and ‘resisting’ the army create a chronology that begins with the siege of the camp rather than the suicide bombings in Israeli cities. An alternative to ‘fortress of resistance’ might have been, for example, ‘launching pad for attacks on Israeli buses and cafes’ (similar to descriptions in Israeli papers). Clearly, one characterization makes one side the initiator or aggressor, while the second shifts aggression to the other side.

**Nahr al-Bared**

Throughout the siege of Nahr al-Bared the two sides are portrayed on equal terms. Most reports describe ‘exchanges’ of mortar and gunfire and ‘skirmishes’ and ‘firefights’. The first article on the fighting, on 21 May, provides accounts of militants with ‘rocket propelled grenades and other heavy weaponry’. The next day, it is reported that militants ‘fired antiaircraft guns and mortars and had night vision goggles and other sophisticated equipment. The Lebanese Army does not have such gear.’ In other words, the militants trapped inside the camp are described as having weaponry superior to the army’s. A similar characterization of the army as the underdog is provided in a 20th June article, which states: ‘Untested, unprepared and outgunned, the army lost 23 soldiers on the first day’.

The few hundred militants trapped in the camp are consistently depicted in terms that put them on equal footing with Lebanon’s 70,000-man army (Cordesman 2005). Descriptions of the militants in Nahr al-Bared as a formidable foe for the army continue in an 11th June article:

He said the army had fired artillery and the militants had fought back with mortar and sniper fire.
In a 7th July article the militants’ position is repeatedly described as being ‘holed up’ or ‘barricaded’ inside the camp. These terms make the militants’ role appear more aggressive than, for example, ‘besieged’, ‘defying’ or ‘resisting’ the army.

Another theme that is repeated is the purported linkage between the Palestinian militants inside the camp and the al-Qaeda terrorist organization. The first article on the fighting, on 21 May, claims that the group inside Nahr al-Bared:

subscribes to the fundamentalist precepts of Al Qaeda.

The group’s leader, Shakir al-Abssi, is a fugitive Palestinian and former associate of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the former leader of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia who was killed last year in Iraq. Both men were sentenced to death in absentia for the 2002 murder of an American diplomat, Lawrence Foley, in Jordan.

Thus, the Palestinians fighting inside the camp are not only well-armed but they are also behind the killing of Americans and are allied with America’s enemies. The alleged connection to al-Qaeda is repeated in almost every article during the conflict. The link to world terror is reinforced in a 7th July article which reports European intelligence officials alarmed at the prospect of Islamic militants establishing bases in Lebanon and states that inside Nahr al-Bared ‘the militants are foreigners and veterans of the war in Iraq’.

**CIVILIAN RESIDENTS OF CAMP**

**Jenin**

Reports on the fighting from the Jenin refugee camp reflect a framing of ‘proximity’, placing heavy emphasis on civilian casualties and suffering by camp residents. The lead of a 9th April article reported an aid group’s warnings of ‘a looming crisis for people in the isolated Jenin refugee camp’ and gave accounts thus:

Two hundred women and children suffering from dehydration emerged from the camp today, aid workers said. Food, water, electricity and ambulances have been blocked from the area for five days. (Rohde)

Depictions of civilian suffering during the fighting continue as an 11th April article tells how:

Palestinian families have been hiding in their homes as Israeli patrols round up their men for questioning and Israeli machine-gun fire pounds through their streets. (Bennet)

Additionally,

Witnesses described masses of women and children fleeing the refugee camp as bulldozers cut through the ramshackle warren of adjoining and stacked homes.
The article has several accounts of men with ‘burns and scabs on their wrists from plastic handcuffs they said they were forced to wear for days’ who were denied food and water. The next day, one article leads with Palestinian stories of:

bodies cut in pieces, bodies scooped up by bulldozers and buried in mass graves, bodies deliberately concealed under collapsed buildings. They describe people drinking out of sewers and people used by Israeli soldiers as human shields. (Bennet)

A 14th April article retells stories of people:

hiding in caves, hearing a neighbor’s handicapped son crying out as a house was demolished on top of him, piling mattresses over children so that Israeli patrols would not hear them wail. (Bennet)

The article also provides vivid depictions of the dead:

charred beyond recognition. One was a male, just over five feet tall. Part of a sneaker remained on the right foot. The left foot and hand were cinders. A woman dressed in black wailed over the body, as flies buzzed in air rotten with the stench of untended death. She pulled away the bit of shoe, in hopes of using it somehow to identify the body. The other body, a few doors away, was buried beneath a crushed wall. Only the blackened, featureless face was visible. A child’s cleated sneaker, with a green Nike swoosh, lay nearby.

**Nahr al-Bared**

In Nahr al-Bared, home to a much larger population and which saw a greater number of casualties and people displaced, framing of the conflict is one of ‘distance’, deterring empathy with the civilians in the camp, with fewer, less prominent and less vivid accounts of civilian suffering. In the first article on the fighting, on 21 May, civilians are not mentioned until after full descriptions of the fight and a discussion of the ‘complex crosscurrents of Lebanon’s politics’. As background to the fighting it is mentioned that the camp is home to 40,000 refugees. In the second half of the article it is reported that:

residents inside the camp, reached by telephone, said at least two civilians had been killed and more than 45 had been injured in the shelling. There was no independent verification of the residents’ claims.

On 23 May, one of the only first-hand accounts from a resident of the camp is provided:

‘It was worse than hell’, said Yasmin Abdel Ain, who left the camp on Tuesday night. ‘The army and Fatah al Islam would fire on each other, but the bombs and bullets landed on us. We were waiting for death.’

Following this quote the report returns to focusing on details of the fighting between the sides. Interestingly, after explaining the complexities of the Lebanese social fabric, the article states:
Many Lebanese see the Palestinians as a growing blight on their country, and blame them for harboring groups like Fatah al Islam. Some residents of Tripoli openly called for the army to destroy the camp altogether, insisting that the Palestinians be forced to move away.

Subsequent articles do not provide accounts of civilians except to say that most have left the camp. On 3 June the only reference to civilian difficulties is a report at the end of the article:

Residents living on the outskirts of the camp, meanwhile, said that they were locking up their homes and barricading their blocks to try to keep the Fatah al Islam fighters from taking cover in their neighborhoods. A statement issued by the army on Saturday said that militants were trying to hide in mosques and aid organizations, storing weapons there and using the remaining civilian population as ‘human shields’ to stir up Muslim anger.

Thus, here it is the militants who are endangering the camp residents and using them as human shields. On 30 June it is colourlessly reported that the army opened fire on demonstrators trying to march back to the besieged refugee camp, killing 2 and wounding 30. Nowhere in the article are demonstrators or relatives of those killed or wounded interviewed. The final article at the end of the fighting, on 3 September, is awash with jubilant praise for the army, but no Palestinian residents are interviewed and there is no mention of 30,000 displaced civilians.

DAMAGE CAUSED BY THE FIGHTING

Jenin

Framing of property damage in the conflicts fits a similar pattern. Reports on the Jenin fighting fit a framing of proximity, replete with sensational depictions of destroyed buildings and infrastructure and descriptions of personal effects. A 9th April article reports that ‘armored bulldozers knocked down homes on top of people living in them, to widen narrow alleys so tanks could pass’ (Brinkley). The lead in an 11th April article describes how the army ‘created a landscape of devastation’ (Schmemann).

The next day, one article opens with a vivid description of destruction in Jenin:

Gray cinder-block walls in the refugee camp were scorched black and punched through by shells. A broad boulevard that was sliced through the camp had been jaggedly paved with the remnants of smashed buildings. From a distance, the camp’s center looked as though a giant’s fist had come down upon it. (Bennet)

On 14 April 14, the last day of fighting, an article describes scenes of devastation:

Along what were once tight alleyways, bulldozers have plowed lanes 25 feet wide through the camp, taking the faces off houses on either side,
and exposing their sofa sets, pictures of smiling children, and roses made of cloth to the boulevards of rubble. The trivia and treasures of people’s lives litter the wasteland: a torn Koran among the crushed cinder blocks; a page from an English-language schoolbook with the words ‘In which country is the Taj Mahal situated?’ in a room missing a wall; a picture of the actor Leonardo DiCaprio under a hole left by a missile. (Bennet)

Nowhere in these and other accounts of the damage during the Jenin fighting are there estimates of the number of dwellings destroyed or the approximate area damaged. Readers are left with the impression that the camp had been destroyed, when in fact (according to a UN report) the area damaged was only 100 square metres. Israeli assertions that many of the buildings were brought down by Palestinian booby traps and that others were demolished when gunmen fighting with troops refused to surrender are delivered colourlessly, with no elaboration and are buried among claims and counterclaims by the two sides.

**Nahr al-Bared**

Reporting of the Nahr al-Bared fighting reflects a distance framing, virtually devoid of details of the damage that destroyed 30,000 people’s homes. Four days after fighting started, on 24 May, an article mentions refugees fleeing the camp, stating:

> As many as 40,000 Palestinians had been trapped inside Nahr al-Bared with no running water or electricity and dwindling food supplies since the fighting erupted Sunday.

There is no further mention of destruction of property. In a 2nd June story, the only mention of property damage is presented in the context of military strategy analysis:

> The army’s strategy seemed to be to gradually reduce the militants’ bases and defenses outside the camp, Nahr al-Bared, and force the fighters inside to concede. A camp resident said most of Fatah al Islam’s positions on the outskirts of the camp had been destroyed, along with numerous multistorey apartment buildings that housed Palestinian refugees.

In a 4th June article damage is again mentioned:

> The army on Sunday also intensified an offensive against Fatah al Islam that began Friday after a 10-day lull at Nahr al-Bared, seeking militants hiding inside, striking deeper inside the camp and as a result heaping further destruction on civilian areas in the camp.

There are no further descriptions of destruction. On 7 July, after six weeks of fighting, in the longest article written during this siege, the end of the fifth paragraph blandly states:

> The continuing battle, which has claimed more than 200 lives, has ruined the camp, now the scene of daily artillery barrages as the Lebanese Army tries to flush out Fatah al Islam.
Finally, on 3 September, at the end of a three-and-a-half month siege, with jubilant descriptions of the victorious army the report also mentions:

The camp, Nahr al-Bared, had been home to 30,000 people, most of whom fled when the conflict started at the end of May. On Sunday, the state-run National News Agency reported that soldiers patrolled the empty camp, much of which had been leveled by army bombs, as helicopters searched for any remaining militants.

EFFECTIVENESS AND UTILITY OF THE OPERATION

**Jenin**

One interesting aspect of the framing of the Jenin fighting is a tendency to brand the operation counterproductive. This is expressed in two ways: doubts about the operation’s effectiveness in stopping suicide bombers, and assertions that damage from the operation will cause animosity that would make peace impossible and lead to further violence. A 10th April article, after vivid descriptions of destruction, cites a Jenin resident saying ‘the Israeli assault and its deadly results had destroyed chances for peace’ (Greenberg). Similarly, a 12th April article ends with the following assessment: ‘Some Palestinians said that one result of the fighting was clear: Peace was now impossible with Israel’ (Bennet). A 14th April article suggests: ‘in the bulldozed ruins of the refugee camp here, seeds of terror may have been planted by the operation itself’ (Bennet).

The headline of an 11th April article asserts: ‘New suicide raid casts doubt on Israeli strategy’. On 14 April, the last day of fighting, another suicide attack is again used to question the effectiveness of the army’s offensive:

Friday’s suicide bombing in Jerusalem. That attack may feed doubts about the ability of Operation Protective Wall, as Mr. Sharon has called the mission, to be either protective or a wall. (Bennet)

**Nahr al-Bared**

During the Nahr al-Bared fighting, one of the frames in reporting this conflict was that the army had no choice in a defensive battle against the forces of radical Islam. For example, an article on 21 May, the first day of fighting, states:

The confrontation with the Islamist group, Fatah al-Islam, raised fears of a wider battle to rout militants in the rest of Lebanon’s 12 refugee camps, where radical Islam has been gaining in recent years. That, in turn, raised the possibility of a deadly conclusion to the crisis, placing strains on the embattled government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora.

In a 7th July article the militants are tied to foreign al-Qaeda forces destabilizing the region, again giving the impression that despite the fact that the army is besieging Nahr al-Bared, it is really fighting a defensive battle in the national interest:

While Lebanon’s troubles are not principally about Islamic militancy, some fear it could become the kind of place that attracts more of it, especially from the Iraq war . . . many Lebanese say the only good news lately
has been that the army fought against the extremists in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp.

In the final article, on 3 September, there is no hint of criticism of the battle that dragged out three and a half months and destroyed the homes of 30,000 people. Despite the army’s demolishing the camp, it is praised for acting with ‘restraint’:

The militants’ failed last stand has burnished the image of the army, which is viewed by Lebanese across the political spectrum as the only institution in the country that represents the state, not individual factions. Despite the prolonged fighting and deaths on both sides, the army has won widespread praise and support for its restraint in a nation that has seen its share of violent clashes.

This article quotes the prime minister as saying ‘It is the greatest national victory for Lebanon over the terrorists in Nahr al-Bared’. The report concludes with Lebanon’s president’s optimistic assessment: ‘President Émile Lahoud said the army “has achieved what superpowers could not in confronting terrorism”.’

The effectiveness or tactics of the Nahr al-Bared campaign were never called into question, even after a series of bombings in Lebanese cities that began after the start of the fighting. Fears of wider violence only seemed to strengthen claims that what started as a pursuit of bank robbers was a do-or-die battle for the country’s survival against international forces of Islamic terror that justified all of the army’s actions.

ANALYSIS OF FRAMING OF THE CONFLICTS

Building on Entman’s (2004) model, this work examines media framing of events, issues and actors in two conflicts through a comparative study of NY Times articles. Media reports from Jenin matched what has been described as ‘framing of proximity’ (Robinson 2002), eliciting greater reader empathy for civilian suffering, while coverage of Nahr al-Bared fit a ‘framing of distance’, leaving readers feeling detached from the conflict’s victims.

The significant divergence in the ‘depth of media coverage’ may be explained in large part by the fact that Jenin was covered by veteran NY Times correspondents while Nahr al-Bared was covered mainly by local journalists. Yet the newspaper’s editors clearly make the final decision on reporter assignments that which stories will be printed and which content is acceptable. Hence, the decision to bring readers – policy-makers and the public – a much more in-depth coverage of one conflict ultimately belonged to the NY Times editorial staff.

Disparity in the framing of the actors in the two conflicts takes place on several levels. First, ‘characterization of the army’ in Jenin was one of distance, made through vivid depictions of inhuman mechanized weapons, such as of ‘an armada of tanks’ ‘crunching’ and ‘cutting’. By contrast, in Nahr al-Bared framing of the army was one of proximity, as it was portrayed as the protector and unifier of the country, beloved by the citizens. Second, the ‘fighters inside the camps’, despite being similar in number, capabilities and logistical position, were depicted quite differently. Those in Jenin were framed in romantic terms...
as ‘hopelessly outgunned’, ‘defying’ and ‘resisting’, and in one case benignly watching children play, eliciting reader sympathy. In Nahr al-Bared, however, framing of the fighters was one of distance and could only draw antipathy of the *NY Times*’ readers, as the militants were depicted as the initiators, said to be outgunning the army and allied with al-Qaeda and Islamic militants fighting the United States in Iraq.

Framing of the passive actors in the two conflicts, the ‘civilian residents of the camps’, also varied significantly. In Jenin, there was framing of proximity with descriptions of the ‘stench’ of rotting corpses and mattresses being put over children. By contrast, there was a framing of distance in Nahr al-Bared, where more than twice as many were killed and ten times as many permanently displaced. There were a few bland accounts of civilians, with hints that many Lebanese see them as the source of the problem in the country’s complex long-standing ethnic feuds. A similar pattern of framing was used in reporting the ‘damage caused by the fighting’. In Jenin a ‘landscape of devastation’ was reported through the personal effects of residents, making the 100 square metre area of fighting seem much larger. In Nahr al-Bared, most of which was destroyed, a few nondescript reports of damage are buried in the context of the necessity to ‘flush out’ the militants.

Finally, reporting of the ‘effectiveness and utility of the armies’ operations’ corresponded to Entman’s function of ‘conveying moral judgement’, a framing that ‘directly promotes interpretations that lead to evaluations’ (2004: 26). Reports from Jenin repeatedly cast the army’s actions as futile and even counterproductive after only about a week into the offensive. Such critiques were proven incorrect with the steep decline in suicide attacks in Israeli cities following the operation. By contrast, in Nahr al-Bared the months of fighting were framed as a decisive battle against the international forces of radical Islam. The effectiveness of the operation was never questioned and once fighting ended (with the destruction of the camp) it was declared that terror had been defeated and the country saved. Despite these optimistic reports, armed conflict has continued unabated in Lebanon. Thus, in both cases, *NY Times*’ framing cast the armies’ actions against the militants in unambiguous moral terms, as either pointless destruction or justified and decisive. Interestingly, in both cases, the assessments were soon proven incorrect.

**EFFECT OF MEDIA FRAMING**

Reporting of the conflicts in Jenin and Nahr al-Bared fit the post-Cold War morality framing discussed in previous research (Bloch-Elkon 2007; Entman 2000). The asymmetry in *NY Times*’ framing of these two conflicts was seen in other media as well (*The Washington Post, The Guardian, BBC, CNN*). This imbalance had a powerful effect on policy-makers and the public.

Media framing of the conflict in Jenin led to editorials highly critical of the Israeli army committing ‘a war crime’, ‘genocide’ and comparing the 52 killed in Jenin to ‘to the depredations of the Nazis or to Cambodia’s’ and ‘Osama bin Laden’s felling of New York’s twin towers’ (Reeves 2002, *Economist* 2002: 10). The ‘authoritative version of reality’ (Barker-Plummer 1995) that emerged from the media’s framing of the conflicts left both the public and policy-makers with a factually incorrect understanding of where greater destruction and loss of human life had taken place and where greater resources for reconstruction were needed.
Less than a week after the end of fighting in Jenin, on 19 April, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 1405 calling for a fact-finding team to be sent to the area. On 7 May the UN General Assembly, in an emergency special session, passed resolution ES-10/10, requesting that the Secretary-General present a report on fighting in Jenin and other Palestinian cities. As stated above, the UN report, presented on 30 July, concluded that 52 Palestinians, the majority of whom were combatants, and 23 Israeli soldiers were killed and 435 families were left homeless after twelve days of fighting in Jenin (none of the reported atrocities were substantiated). Before the report’s publication, Jenin was visited by several foreign dignitaries, including the UN Secretary-General and an American Assistant Secretary of State, to view first-hand the destruction that had been so vividly reported. Israel was subject to international criticism during the period prior to the release of the UN report for the perceived widespread destruction and alleged massacres in Jenin, and international donors contributed millions of dollars to help rebuild in Jenin.

After the fighting in Nahr al-Bared ended, UNRWA appealed to the international community for hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to rebuild the camp and help the tens of thousands of displaced inhabitants. However, unlike the Jenin case, the world acted with detachment. There were no resolutions in either the General Assembly or the Security Council and no fact-finding mission was sent. Lebanon was never criticized for the destruction of the camp and little rebuilding has taken place.

Surely the international response was also affected by geopolitics, economics and cultural alliances. Yet, these two cases represent a microcosm of the media’s framing of foreign conflicts. Conflicts that produce smaller levels of casualties and damage often draw more attention from the public and decision-makers because of the framing of those conflicts, while larger calamities are often ignored, as their framing does not elicit as much empathy.

CAUSES OF INCONSISTENT FRAMING

Research on media offers possible explanations for the inconsistent framing of different conflicts. Galtung and Ruge (1965) assert the importance of cultural proximity in the structure of foreign reporting in a number of ways. The proximity of the home audience to either of the sides in the conflict will affect the portrayal of elites and common people in narratives and quotes. They also find that the more distant a nation is culturally, the greater the tendency to stereotype and reduce complexity, presenting events and people in ‘ideal types’ (Galtung and Ruge 1965: 81).

This may offer one explanation for the differences in the Jenin and Nahr al-Bared reporting. The *NY Times* correspondents were Americans reporting on a clash between two cultures that were distant from their own, and may have had more of a tendency to report in a simple stereotyped way – the weak versus the strong – than the Arab journalists who had much greater proximity to the sides in the fighting in Lebanon. Thus, the American journalists visiting the region in the case of Jenin employed a caricature-like framing of the weaker side as the valiant underdog (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Hess 1996) that was not seen with the Arab journalists in Lebanon. Additionally, the local reporters may have been affected by a nationalist Lebanese narrative in taking a more
hardened approach to the collateral damage caused in the course of routing out militants.

News reporting is also affected by business pressures to bring more sensationalist stories that will attract larger audiences (Philo and Berry 2004; Seib and Fizpatrick 1997). Reporting is also limited by a myriad of obstacles in various countries, legal, political and physical which prevent or discourage journalists from covering events in particular places (Hess 1996; Reporters Without Borders 2007). Journalists may also be deterred from covering events in countries where physical conditions, such as lack of communications infrastructure, electricity or transportation, are lacking (Hess 1996). While these factors may explain the limited coverage of conflicts in more remote areas of Africa and Asia, they do not explain the difference in the framing of the two conflicts studied in this work.

Two other interrelated factors may provide a better explanation for the difference in the framing of these and other conflicts. First, journalists, like people in most professions, prefer good working and living conditions. Assignments in countries with comfortable hotels, nice restaurants and other amenities are clearly more desirable than those in remote regions lacking toilets and drinking water. Reporters covering Jenin were able, at the end of the day, to take a half-hour taxi ride to the Mediterranean city of Tel Aviv, with its beautiful beaches and five-star restaurants (Gutmann 2005). The possibility of advancing one’s career as a ‘war correspondent’ while enjoying a high standard of living is one factor that has drawn so much media attention to this conflict. Perhaps this helps explain why there were more than 1000 international correspondents stationed in Israel during the Jenin conflict (Gutmann 2005).

The presence of so many journalists leads to the second factor – ‘pack journalism’ (Crouse 1973; Seib and Fizpatrick 1997). This term describes a phenomenon whereby an aggregation of journalists will begin to develop the same attitudes and perspectives on the events they are covering, what Seib and Fizpatrick (1997: 33) refer to as ‘tunnel vision’. Consequently, there is a cyclical effect, whereby conflicts that are most reported come to be considered most newsworthy. As the public becomes more concerned with these conflicts they draw more attention from policy-makers, thus drawing more media attention.

**CONCLUSION**

The problem with the media’s inconsistent framing of international conflicts is its powerful effect on public opinion and foreign policy. There is a good deal of debate within academic research as to which factors have the greatest influence on foreign policy. Some research shows government officials using their role as news sources to promote foreign policy through media reports (Peake 2001) and ‘perceive the media as too subservient to government’ (Entman 2004: 4). Others posit that the media’s ability to affect foreign policy depends on how divided political decision-makers are on particular issues (Hallin 1984; Robinson 2000). However, a growing body of research asserts that since the end of the Cold War the balance between government and the media has shifted (Entman 2004) and that the media is now one of the most important influences on foreign policy (Edwards and Wood 1999; Robinson 2002; Soroka 2003; Wood and Peake 1998).

The media affects policy-makers both indirectly, through its influence on public opinion, and directly, by structuring their perception of ‘reality’, which is
based largely on information about international affairs conveyed in elite publications such as the NY Times. Hence, the effect of media framing of foreign events is potentially greater than that of domestic issues, as the news reports from abroad transmitted to the public and policy-makers are often their only reference to those events.

Furthermore, with limited airtime and print space, the disproportionate diversion of media resources to one conflict often limits the attention given to other conflicts. During the 12 days of the Jenin conflict there were 36 NY Times news stories related to the fighting there. During that same period there were only 22 NY Times news stories on all the countries in Africa combined. While the majority of the stories related to Jenin were more than 1000 words in length, 85 per cent of the news stories on Africa were less than 500 words and one-third were less than 100 words. Consequently, dozens of conflicts, thousands of deaths and massive humanitarian crises, in an area thousands of times the size of Israel, the Palestinian territories and Lebanon combined, received little or no attention. Inconsistent media framing plays an important part in inconsistent foreign policy priorities and, in many cases, a failure to anticipate significant foreign conflicts and crises.

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**Coverage of Jenin**

(April 3–April 14, 2002)

Mideast Turmoil: Fighting; Israel Steps Up Military Pressure in West Bank

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Our Towns; Live, Via Satellite, All the News That Fits Your Viewpoint

Mideast Turmoil; Arafat’s Stand on Terror; U.S. Reaction

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(May 21–September 3, 2007)

Lebanese Troops Fight Islamists; Dozens Are Slain
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Inside

Refugees Pour Out of Camp in Lebanon

Militant Hints at Resolution in Lebanon

18 Dead in Lebanon As Army and Camp Militants Clash
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The Journal of European Popular Culture investigates the creative cultures of Europe, present and past. Exploring European popular imagery, media, new media, film, music, art and design, architecture, drama and dance, fine art, literature and the writing arts, and more, the journal is also of interest to those considering the influence of European creativity and European creative artefacts worldwide.

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