

Dynamics of interaction: how Israeli authorities succeeded in disrupting and containing the 2011 Freedom Flotilla to Gaza

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Abstract

Groups working for change are met with many types of responses. Most attention has been given to reactions of overt repression or support for movements and campaigns. However, there exist a range of other pacifying responses, such as ignoring, placating, devaluing, disrupting and misinforming. These subtler forms of obstructions pose a different type of challenge and require different types of counter-strategies than violent repression.

This article introduces a framework focusing on four different types of responses – 1. Validating, 2. Discrediting and attacking, 3. Manipulative and 4. Non-interfering. This model can be applied to analyse responses to all types of nonviolent campaigns from opponents and so-called third parties. The Freedom Flotilla to Gaza in 2011 serves as a case study to present the model and to analyse how the Israeli government and its supporters successfully disrupted and contained this flotilla with much more subtle means than the 2010 flotilla where nine activists were killed.

Introduction

When activists and academics think about how opponents and third parties respond to nonviolent action, the first things that come to mind are usually forms of direct repression and support. Research and awareness about all the responses which fall in between is extremely limited. Using the case study of the Freedom Flotilla to Gaza in 2011, I will explore different pacifying responses, such as ignoring, placating, devaluing, disrupting and misinforming. These subtler forms of obstructions pose a different type of challenge and require different types of counter-strategies.

The idea behind the Freedom Flotillas is simple – to break the Israeli state's blockade of Gaza by bringing humanitarian assistance and international visitors to Gaza in solidarity with the Palestinian population. In 2010, the first Freedom Flotilla was met with brutal repression from the Israeli state when nine activists were killed. In 2011, the flotilla organisers had planned for a larger flotilla, but Israeli authorities and its supporters successfully disrupted and contained almost the entire flotilla without any outright repression. Because nine out of the ten boats were planning to depart from ports in Greece, one of the main obstacles was the Greek state's issuing of a travel ban on all the boats heading for Gaza. The differences between 2010 and 2011 make the 2011 flotilla a critical case for identifying what the Israeli state and its supporters did differently. The

present analysis of the case involves an in-depth investigation of the events of 2011, something which is lacking in academic research. It has also been the basis for revising my existing framework for analysing responses to nonviolent campaigns (Sørensen 2015).

Below I start with presenting the limited literature on responses to nonviolent campaigns, the methodology used for the case study, and a short background to the blockade of Gaza and the Freedom Flotillas. The main part of the article is the analysis of the 2011 events, which simultaneously presents the revised framework which can be used for studying interaction between nonviolent campaigns and their surroundings. The two final parts discuss how Israeli authorities and their supporters managed to successfully disrupt and contain the 2011 Freedom Flotilla and suggest possible counter-strategies activists can consider when their campaigns encounter these types of responses.

Literature on responses

The literature on responses to nonviolent campaigns is limited, but an interesting journalistic approach to the topic is Dobson's (2012) *The dictator's Learning Curve: Inside the Global Battle for Democracy*. Previously I have explored this topic in the book *Responses to Nonviolent Campaigns: Beyond Repression or Support* (Sørensen, 2015) which investigates the different ways opponents and so-called third parties react to initiatives from nonviolent campaigns. As the title indicates, the purpose was to get beyond the obvious responses where the reaction is either direct support or outright repression. The intention was to produce an analytical framework which was broad enough to be applied to all nonviolent campaigns, yet sufficiently detailed that it could be used for a meaningful analysis of particular cases by both researchers and campaigners themselves. The framework developed was inspired by Martin's work on backfire (Martin, 2007), Mathiesen's writing on power and counter-power (Mathiesen, 1982) and Lubbers' investigation of private companies' manipulation and infiltration of social movements (Lubbers, 2012). The book includes five case studies of nonviolent campaigns, ranging in time from the Norwegian teachers', priests' and parents' resistance to Nazism during the German occupation 1940-1945 to the popular uprising in Egypt in 2011. The present case study applies a slightly revised version of the framework to a completely different case, the Freedom Flotilla to Gaza.

Recently, Kurtz and Smithey's (2018) edited volume *The Paradox of Repression and Nonviolent Movements* has also investigated responses to nonviolent actions. They have overlapping interests with my previous work, but approach the subject from a different perspective. Where I have focused on the various forms of responses and counter-strategies, the aspiration of Kurtz and Smithey is to understand how movements can learn to prepare for and manage the repression to which they are subjected. In their introduction, the editors (Smithey and Kurtz, 2018b) emphasise that their definition of repression goes beyond the conventional understanding of repression as direct violence. Instead

they present repression as a continuum which goes from “overt violence” to hegemony, including “less lethal” methods, intimidation, manipulation and soft repression. Smithey and Kurtz develop this further in chapter 8 about smart repression (Smithey and Kurtz, 2018c). The term “smart repression” is intended to catch the same paradox as when the military use the term “smart bombs” – to reduce a potential backfire effect, demobilize protest and to wage war more strategically in ways that are politically acceptable. While Smithey and Kurtz’s effort to shed light on various attempts to control and subdue movements, which are not generally referred to as repression, it makes conversation between academics and activists more difficult when everyday terms are defined in unconventional ways. Likewise, the previous research on repression that Smithey and Kurtz present in a thorough literature review is also using the term in its traditional way. Thus, in this article, I use the term repression to mean direct violence and threats to use direct violence.

Smithey and Kurtz present their continuum with illustrative examples, but unfortunately, they don’t use it for any in-depth case analysis. The relatively brief overview creates uncertainty about how the categorisation of empirical examples should be done. Why, for instance is manipulation a category on its own and not part of “soft repression”? There might be good reasons for this choice, but they are not explained. The case studies included in *The Paradox of Repression and Nonviolent Movements*, for instance on Egypt, Thailand and Zimbabwe are primarily covering how activists deal with direct violence so they cannot move the understanding of the subtler forms of responses forward. The only case analysis which systematically considers what they call “smart repression” is Myra Marx Ferree’s book chapter “Soft Repression: Ridicule, Stigma, and Silencing in Gender-Based Movements” published already in 2005 (Ferree, 2005). Here she introduced the term “soft repression”, and defined it as ways of silencing or eradicating oppositional ideas without the use of violence. Drawing on examples from how the women’s movement has been met with soft repression, she introduces the three categories of ridicule, stigma and silencing, which roughly address the micro, meso and macro level. What is especially interesting is how she included other repressive forces than the state in her analysis, for instance the institutional bias in media reporting.

Methodology

Investigating the dynamics of interaction is notoriously difficult, since one can seldom know what would have happened if one actor had acted differently on a certain occasion. For this reason I selected the Freedom Flotillas to Gaza in 2010 and 2011 for this case study. Since the action “design” was almost identical in the two flotillas, which both sent boats with humanitarian assistance and international solidarity activists to Gaza, this creates an interesting point of comparison for investigating what Israel’s government and its supporters did differently and how it affected the dynamic of the interaction. One can say that this is a natural experiment which provides unique possibilities for studying how different responses radically change the interaction. After 2011, flotillas

have continued to travel to Gaza and there has been an important learning process taking place among the flotilla organisers. However, subsequent flotilla actions have been different from the first two in so many respects that it makes it difficult to use them as cases in a comparative research design focusing on the reactions to the actions.

The 2011 flotilla is the primary case, but the 2010 events are used for comparison and background. The facts about the case study are based on public information, such as newspaper articles, press releases and websites. This is supplemented with information from one of the participants. Activist-academic Stellan Vinthagen, who participated in organizing both the flotillas in 2010 and 2011 and was in place in Greece in 2011 as the person responsible for trainings in nonviolence, kindly gave me access to his notes which included his perception of how the Israeli authorities and other “western” states responded in 2011. Vinthagen has also provided further information in personal communication. To the extent possible I have tried to confirm this information through public sources, but where this has not been possible it is clearly indicated.

Needless to say, information from more participants would have provided more examples and details, but since the intention is to present the revised framework for analysis and not provide the ultimate analysis of the Freedom Flotilla, more details are unlikely to have contributed much to the present article.

Vinthagen’s notes included a list of 16 tactics used against the 2011 flotilla. The list was constructed to analyse the flotilla experience and had no intention of being comparable with other cases. The first step in analysing the flotilla case was to compare Vinthagen’s list with my 2015 model, searching for what fit and what did not. On this basis, I have slightly revised the original model to make it even more useful for analysing a variety of cases.¹

The blockade of Gaza and the Freedom Flotillas

In 2005, Israel withdrew from Gaza; in 2006, Hamas won the election in the Gaza strip in an election that was considered to be free and fair. In June 2007, Hamas lawfully took power, prompting the Israeli state to declare the Gaza Strip a “hostile territory”, a phrase which is not recognised by international law (Sanger, 2011: 399-400). Israeli authorities also initiated sanctions towards Hamas, which consisted of restrictions on the passage of people, fuel, electricity

¹ The main difference is that I have now devised a new main category called “Manipulative responses”. This includes the subcategories “placating” and “co-opting” which was previously placed in the main category “pacifying responses”. In addition, I moved the category “reframing” to be part of “manipulative responses” and created the new sub-category “misinformation”. I also removed the sub-category “containing”. What I had previously (Sørensen 2015) described as “containing” can just as well be included in the sub-category “disruption”.

and other goods. Prior to the election, Israel's government had declared that it no longer occupies the Gaza Strip, but since Israel remains in control of the borders, airspace, water, electricity and population registry, the United Nations has rejected this statement (Sanger, 2011: 400). The isolation of Gaza has severely affected the living conditions for the civilian population. In April 2010, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that less than a quarter of the goods necessary to meet the population's basic needs were entering Gaza (Sanger, 2011: 401). Israeli authorities claimed it was imposing the restrictions for security reasons and to exert political pressure, but at the same time it has also said that the purpose was to put the population of Gaza "on a diet" (Sanger, 2011: 435). In international law, blockades can be legal, but a blockade that has the effect of causing the civilian population to starve will always be illegal (Sanger, 2011: 414). The consequences of the blockade included a shortage of food in Gaza and lack of building materials.

The Freedom Flotilla to Gaza was one initiative among many nonviolent direct actions where outsiders have attempted to influence the complex conflict surrounding the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. During 2008, the Free Gaza Movement organized several boats to break the blockade and bring humanitarian assistance to Gaza, and some of the boats managed to break the blockade while others were intercepted by the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) (Berlin and Dienst, 2012). In 2010, a coalition of organisations organized the first Freedom Flotilla on a larger scale, involving six ships. Carrying around 700 unarmed civilian passengers from around the world and a total of 10,000 tons of humanitarian aid, the ships were boarded by the IDF while they were still in international waters. Nine people on board the Turkish ship *Mavi Mamara* were shot to death by the IDF. Israeli authorities claimed the soldiers acted in self-defence when the activists on board the ship defended the ship with knives, iron bars and firearms, and that 10 commando soldiers were wounded (Mor, 2014).

The flotillas were examples of what is called a dilemma action in the literature on nonviolent resistance, constructed by the activists to be successful no matter how the Israeli authorities responded. In 2010, the dilemma for the Israeli state was choosing between allowing the flotilla to land and using force to intercept it (Sørensen and Martin, 2014). Had the flotillas managed to break the blockade and deliver humanitarian aid that would have been considered an obvious success for the organisers, but the brutal repression in 2010 backfired on Israel (Martin, 2010). Although the loss of life was tragic, it contributed to bringing the issue of the blockade to the agenda internationally, something the organisers could be satisfied with. Killing nine people was a public relations disaster for the Israeli government, although the government maintained that the action was justified and necessary (Mor, 2014). Nevertheless, officials in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that "never has Israel's position in the international arena been worse" (Eichner et al. 2010, quoted in Mor 2014). The incident sparked deterioration of relations with Turkey, until then Israel's closest ally in the Middle East, and even the US administration condemned the

Israeli government. The UN investigation of the events found that Israel's use of force had been excessive and unreasonable (Palmer et al., 2011).

However, from the Israeli point of view, the activists also made mistakes which Israel could utilize and which played a role in the 2011 events. Because all passengers on board the ships were detained, the Israeli authorities' version of events dominated the media reporting for the first 48 hours. No matter how justified one might consider the self-defence undertaken by the activists, the Israeli authorities could with some credibility claim that the activists had used violence, something the authorities' representatives used to their maximum advantage. The violence committed by some activists were used to justify the violent response against all passengers and preparations for violence against the 2011 flotilla.

The action did have the effect that the Gaza blockade conditions were changed, although the changes were very moderate (Sanger, 2011) and it is unlikely that Israel's government would have admitted the flotilla was the cause. Israeli authorities also used this fact in their handling of the 2011 flotilla.

A number of people who took part in the 2010 flotilla have written about their experiences in books and articles (Bayoumi, 2010, Löfgren, 2010, Lano, 2014, Kosmatopoulos, 2010). The flotilla has also been used as an example to discuss academic neutrality in relation to ethnography (de Jong, 2012), the notion of dilemma actions (Sørensen and Martin, 2014) as well as the structure of rhetorical defence in diplomacy (Mor, 2014). Academic writing has analysed the juridical aspects of the Israeli blockade and the interception of the ships in 2010 in relation to international law (Sanger, 2011), and Saba (2019) has analysed how the Freedom Flotilla organisers framed the action in legal terms and how the events affected mainstream English language media's discourse on Gaza. However, no academic analysis of the 2011 flotilla exists.

Analysing the dynamics of the 2011 flotilla

The framework for the analysis consists of four main categories: 1. *Validating responses*, 2. *Responses of discrediting and attacking*, 3. *Manipulative responses* and 4. *Non-interfering responses*. For an overview, see appendix A. Below all four are introduced with their subcategories and utilised to analyse how the 2011 responses solved the dilemma for the Israeli state.

Validating responses

The category of validating responses has two sub-categories – *supporting* and *acknowledging*. Below I will focus on all those who expressed disapproval or condemned the flotilla in 2011, but a number of organisations and countries did express outright support. One of these was Hamas in Gaza which urged people to participate in the flotilla (CBC News, 2011), support which the Israeli representatives attempted to use to discredit the flotilla. *Acknowledging* an action means recognizing that it takes place without expressing an opinion

about it. Frequently, media attention is a form of acknowledgement, something which the preparations for the 2011 flotilla did achieve, although not to the extent the organisers had hoped for and little compared to the attention the flotilla got in 2010 after the IDF's attack.

Responses of discrediting and attacking

The category of discrediting and attacking includes the four sub-categories of *devaluing*, *enforcing sanctions*, *disrupting* and *intimidating*. *Devaluing* takes place when the actions or initiators of nonviolent campaigns are denigrated, for instance by associating them with something undesirable. *Enforcing sanctions* are when those in charge of rules, regulations and laws enforce them, for instance when fire regulations are enforced rigorously for political organisations critical of governments, but not for anyone else. *Disrupting* occurs when organisations are infiltrated or equipment is sabotaged to make it more difficult or impossible to carry on as planned. *Intimidating* consists of threats or direct assaults on people. All of these subcategories are highly relevant when analysing the 2011 flotilla.

An important strategy from Israel's supporters was to *devalue* the flotilla activists. In this sub-category we find statements that condemn the flotilla activists as being "useful idiots" for Hamas, ignorant of the implications of their actions. The commander of the Israeli navy, Admiral Marom, referred to the flotilla as a "Hate Flotilla", whose only goal was to clash with the IDF, provoke and delegitimise Israel and allow Hamas to gain access to an unlimited number of weapons (Pfeffer, 2011). The IDF claimed that according to its intelligence sources, some of the people on board the ships were planning on killing soldiers and use sulphur as a chemical weapon (Katz, 2011). Israel's foreign minister Lieberman said on radio that the flotilla activists were "terror activists" who were "looking for blood" (Jerusalem Post, 2011). The fact that attempts at devaluation occur does not necessarily mean they have the desired effect of those who use devaluation, and there is no source of information currently available which reveals if and to what degree anyone believed the Israeli authorities' allegations.

Several responses to the 2011 flotilla involved attempts at using rules, laws and regulations to stop the boats, something which is part of the sub-category *enforcing sanctions*. The most severe enforcement of sanctions was the Greek travel ban which forbade all the boats heading for Gaza from leaving the harbours in Greece. Since the large majority of the boats in the flotilla were planning to leave from Greece, this was a severe obstacle the flotilla organisers had not been prepared for.

In addition to the travel ban, there were also a number of other attempts at using laws and regulations against the flotilla. While waiting in Greek harbours, the boats seem to have been subject to an excessive number of inspections from the port authorities and coast guard due to suspected breaches of safety regulations. Vinthagen recalls that minor issues regarding the boats waiting in

Greece received an excessive amount of attention. For instance, the name of the boat *Juliano* that Vinthagen was travelling on was not written on all life-jackets. On other boats, the Greek authorities raised concern about the lack of hot water in the showers, claimed the air conditioning was not good enough, the beds were too small, the life craft had the old name of the boat and that some of the flashlights were old. The captain of *Juliano* was also accused of not answering the VHF radio and blocking the entrance to the port. Activists had video and photo evidence to the contrary, but it did not help and the captain could not continue as captain of the boat (Vinthagen's notes and personal communication with Vinthagen).

When two ships disobeyed the Greek ban, they were intercepted by the Greek coast guard and brought to a Greek naval facility. The American captain of *Audacity of Hope* was arrested and charged with endangering the lives of the 50 passengers and trying to leave the port without permission (CBC News, 2011). According to Vinthagen, the captain had to spend several days in prison and was threatened with "severe consequences". This could have served to deter other boats from leaving and captains from working on the boats.

A major hindrance for the flotilla consisted of all the responses which *disrupted* the preparations but were not related to the enforcement of laws and regulations. Some of this was minor, while other things were far more severe. The website of the Swedish organisation participating in the flotilla was attacked (July 16-17). The boat *Juliano* was told that there was no place for it in the harbour, which was a pure lie according to Vinthagen. The Canadian captain of this boat also said that papers he handed over to Greek authorities mysteriously disappeared. Other disruptions which were not violent were Cyprus' refusal to let the boats refuel on the island, and how governments decided to repeal the flags of boats. For instance, the ships sailing under the flag of Sierra Leone had their flag repealed (Ship to Gaza Sweden, 2011b). None of these disruptions were a threat to anyone's life, but taken together they severely disrupted the flotilla preparations.

For actions and campaigns such as the flotillas, there will always be suspicions about infiltration and *agents provocateurs*. This suspicion can have an equally damaging effect as the actual infiltration because of the distrust it creates among participants. For movements guided by the principles of nonviolence, agent provocateurs that incite violence can be highly disruptive, but such activities are by nature hard to prove. It seems likely that both Hamas and the Israeli authorities had agents in the Freedom Flotilla, and it would have been a severe oversight of the Israeli intelligence service if it had not at least tried to infiltrate in order to gather information.

Another form of disruption was to discourage people from participating in the flotilla. The so-called Middle East Quartet – the US, UN, EU and Russia – urged people who wanted to support the inhabitants of Gaza to do it through "established channels" such as the Israeli and Egyptian land crossings. According to CBC news, the Quartet "urges restraint and calls on all governments concerned to use their influence to discourage additional flotillas,

which risk the safety of their participants and carry the potential for escalation" (CBC News, 2011). When such influential institutions are actively discouraging participation, this marks a severe attempt to disrupt the organizers' efforts. To what degree they succeed is, of course, a different story.

Apart from all the subtle, discreet and manipulative attempts to cause trouble for the Flotilla, the Israeli state also engaged in outright *intimidation*. IDF Officers who were interviewed threatened deadly military violence such as sniper fire "if necessary" (Harel, 2010). In addition, non-lethal weapons mentioned were IDF attack dogs and water cannons (Greenberg, 2010). Vinthagen's notes also mention that key organisers of the flotilla reported receiving threatening phone calls, and someone found a broken doll in his home.

Another form of intimidation was the sabotage of two of the boats which had similar propeller damage. The Irish ship *Saoirse* was docked in Turkish waters and the Greek-Swedish boat *Juliano* in Greek waters. The flotilla organisers suspected the Israeli intelligence service of being responsible (Hass, 2011), but no conclusion was reached. The Irish ship was eventually repaired and together with a Canadian boat it formed the *Freedom Waves Flotilla*, which left from Turkey in order to circumvent the Greek travel ban. *Freedom Waves* approached Gaza in November 2011 and were intercepted by the IDF while it was in international waters. Although it might seem excessive to resort to sabotage, it would not be the first time in history that a state sabotaged ships involved in nonviolent direct action. In 1985 the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* was sabotaged in New Zealand and the Portuguese photographer Fernando Pereira was killed in the explosion. The ship was on its way to protest nuclear testing in the Pacific carried out by France. At first France denied all responsibility but a few months later the prime minister admitted that French intelligence was behind it, and two agents were sentenced to 10 years in prison by a court in New Zealand (Brown, 2005). Although no one has been convicted when it comes to the Freedom Flotilla in 2011, it is obvious that the Israeli state had an interest in stopping the ships, and its intelligence service has been known to resort to far-reaching methods on other occasions. Flotilla activists also reported being suspicious of men "fishing" near gasoline polluted water in the vicinity of the flotilla boats. These fishermen did not have bait or buckets, which caused flotilla activists to think they may be spying on the ships (Hass, 2011).

Manipulative responses

The category *manipulative responses* includes the categories *placating*, *co-opting*, *misinforming* and *reframing*. *Placating* takes place when someone is calmed down with minor concessions, but I have not identified any examples of placating from the Israeli state and its supporters when it comes to the 2011 Freedom Flotilla. *Co-opting* tactics have succeeded when radical movements change their behaviour in order to be considered "serious", for instance

participating in meetings with the industry or authorities they were originally strongly condemning. *Misinforming* is when false information is intentionally produced and stakeholders lie and disinforming. *Reframing* takes place when the issue at stake is conceptualised differently.

The category of *co-opting* does not play a major role in the case of the Freedom Flotilla, but the suggestion to move the aid from the flotilla and take it through a channel approved by Israel was an attempt to co-opt the flotilla. Had the flotilla accepted, it would have backed down on the right to bring humanitarian aid to Gaza, and accepted Israel's insistence on setting the terms for delivering humanitarian aid.

The case includes several examples of *misinforming*, even though assigning responsibility for the lies is not always possible. For instance, a fake video was posted on Facebook where a man claimed that the organisers of the flotilla had refused to let him participate because he was gay. It turned out that the video was fake, and that the man featured in it was a public relations expert. When the video was posted on Twitter by a man working as an intern at prime minister Netanyahu's office, this caused the Israeli newspaper Haaretz to speculate that the prime minister's office had also produced it (Ravid, 2011).

One of the participants in the flotilla was the famous Swedish crime novelist Henning Mankell, and an unknown person tried to establish two fake Facebook accounts in his name in order to discredit him while he was onboard the flotilla. Mankell and his publisher discovered the fraud in May 2011 when a journalist wondered whether Mankell really wanted to be his friend on Facebook, or if someone else was fraudulently using his name on the account. At first, the platform was used to communicate statements that resembled the attitudes of the real Mankell, but in mid-May the intentions of the identity hijacker became clear. Then "Mankell" was linking to an article in Jerusalem Post about Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon, saying that he agreed with Nasrallah's statements (Israel, 2011), something the real Mankell did not. This makes it likely that the purpose was to spread false statements from Mankell when he was on board the freedom flotilla in order to discredit him and the flotilla. Mankell and his publisher reported the incident to the police and worked on getting Facebook to shut down the fake profile. Shortly afterwards a new account appeared with the name Mankell Henning, and once that was shut down, "Mankell" started to send messages to the foreign press from a fake gmail account (Israel, 2011). Unless someone who was responsible comes forward to inform on these attempts at misinforming, it will remain uncertain who was behind them. But they were serving the interests of the Israeli state in its attempts to discredit the flotilla.

Framing is a term used in social movement literature to talk about how movements conceptualise the issues they work on and present their issues and struggles to various audiences (Benford and Snow, 2000, Snow, 2004) There is a considerable body of literature on framing, counterframing and adversarial framing for anyone who is particularly interested in this type of response. The literature builds on Benford and Snow's (2000) original work where they

distinguish between three forms of framing that movements engage in: “Diagnostic framing”, which identifies problems and their causes, “prognostic framing” which present possible solutions to handle the problems, and “motivational framing” which motivates continued participation in a movement. Framing and *reframing* is a continuous struggle, as this will determine which discourse about a given issue will dominate the agenda and public mind. Although it might be difficult in practice to make a clear distinction between discrediting, misinforming and reframing, in analytical and moral terms it makes a tremendous difference. Even when one might disagree strongly with an opponent regarding how to interpret facts and events, there is a major difference between a legitimate right to a different opinion and the fabrication of lies or “alternative facts.”

The main discourse the flotilla organisers used was that the ships were bringing humanitarian aid and solidarity to the suffering civilians in Gaza. The Israeli authorities did their best to reframe this as a provocation towards Israel and support for Hamas. The flotilla organisers faced an additional challenge when Hamas publicly stated it was welcoming the flotilla. Preventing Hamas from getting arms is a legitimate military objective, and when the Israeli state tried to frame the whole blockade, including the blockade of people, food and building material, as necessary to achieve this objective, it was necessary for the flotilla organisers to reframe this as an overly-excessive approach with dire humanitarian consequences.

In order for the Israeli state to promote its perspective, it was essential to cast doubt on the humanitarian aspect of the flotilla. By offering to let the assistance on board the ships get into Gaza, but in another way, the Israeli state attempted to appear to be positive towards humanitarian aid and deflect attention away from the fact that the blockade itself is illegal. When the flotilla organisers refused to accept this “solution”, they were the ones who appeared stubborn and inflexible. This made the flotilla appear not to be primarily concerned about getting the aid to Gaza, and it became easier for supporters and representatives of the Israeli state to argue that the main purpose was to seek a confrontation.

Another issue which the Israeli government tried to frame to its advantage was the slight easing of the blockade announced in June 2010 after the critique arising following the interception of the first flotilla (Sanger, 2011). Although the flotilla organisers have subsequently emphasized that the blockade was still illegal and the amount of goods which were allowed into Gaza was only raised slightly and still considered utterly inadequate, there was nevertheless a small concession. Naturally, the Israeli state used this fact to create the image that it was willing to change and that the situation was improving. Other states and observers could “buy” this fact in order to argue for a more moderate approach towards Israel, making the condemnations of the blockade less severe.

The Israeli government stated that the military objective of the blockade was to prevent weapons and ammunition from reaching Hamas, and according to international law Israel would be justified to search ships going to Gaza for such

items. According to Sanger, this was a viable option which made the blockade of Gaza “disproportionate” (Sanger, 2011: 436).

The whole issue about framing and reframing is not likely to affect those who are already strongly committed to support or condemn the flotilla. No matter how well the other side argues its case, such committed people are unlikely to change their viewpoints. However, for all those with less loyalty to either side, such struggles over framing are significant. When it comes to the position of organisations like the EU and UN, it is reasonable to argue that an appealing frame matters just as much as the actual facts.

Non-interfering responses

The category of *non-interfering responses* includes four sub-categories: *ignoring/avoiding*, *expressing confusion/bewilderment*, *expressing disapproval* and *misunderstanding*. Regarding the case of the Freedom Flotilla, both ignoring/avoiding and the expression of disapproval are relevant to understand the interaction.

Ignoring/avoiding takes place when opponents and third parties do not give the nonviolent campaign any attention. There might be many reasons why actors decide to ignore or avoid the issue, for instance they might apply a “wait and see” attitude or they hope that the initiators of campaigns might not manage to put the issue on the agenda if they are just ignored. As described above, this was not an option chosen by the Israeli government, but many other states and organisations remained silent about the 2011 Freedom Flotilla for a long time. Ignoring is a response which can be observed when it comes to the initial action, but also when it comes to the subsequent interaction. For instance, when the IDF responded with brutal intimidation in 2010, few actors could ignore it. But in 2011 when Greece issued the travel ban, the situation was completely different. For instance, a leading Swedish newspaper criticised the Swedish government and the EU for its silence. On the editorial page, it said that Sweden ought to protest officially when the free movement of its citizens was restricted, calling the lack of reaction from the Swedish minister of foreign affairs “embarrassing” (Lindberg, 2011). Thus, ignoring/avoiding can be a relevant category to apply on so-called third parties, like the Swedish state, when it comes to actions/reactions between other actors.

In many cases, mass media are very important actors because they are seen as the gatekeepers who determine which information reaches the general public. Many factors contribute to decisions made by editors of newspapers, radio and TV regarding what to publish. The slogan “if it bleeds, it leads” sums up why the 2010 boarding of the Freedom Flotilla made the headlines worldwide, and also indicates why there was much less news coverage of the 2011 events. According to Vinthagen, the organisers of the flotilla felt ignored by the media, but for most editors, a travel ban and bureaucratic obstacles are much less newsworthy than the death of nine activists.

The 2011 events also include the incident where a private company had made an agreement with the flotilla about selling cement. Cement was one of the items Israel was blockading from entering Gaza, but a commodity in high demand for reconstruction work after the bombings. According to Vinthagen, the product had already been paid for when the company said it could not deliver as promised and had to cancel the contract and return the money. It referred to the situation as “force majeure” as a reason for cancelling the contract. One can only speculate about the reasons for this decision from a privately owned company; its leaders might have been supportive of Israel or someone might have put pressure on the company. No matter the motive, it was one more piece of grit thrown into the machinery for the flotilla which had a disruptive effect.

The two sub-categories of *expressing confusion/bewilderment* and *misunderstanding* are relevant for other cases, but I have not identified any such responses when it comes to the Freedom Flotilla. Thus, the last sub-category to be presented here is the *expression of disapproval*. As discussed in relation to reframing, opponents and third parties have a right to a different opinion and it is completely legitimate to express disapproval of the flotilla, which many governments did. However, the border between expressing disapproval and other responses is thin. Disapproval might easily slip into devaluing or reframing.

Analysis: a successful containment

In 2010, the first flotilla created a severe dilemma for the Israeli authorities. Letting the boats deliver humanitarian aid was impossible for reasons to do with the internal political situation, and the chosen option of a violent attack backfired and created a public relations disaster. That the Israeli state chose a different response in 2011 is a clear indication that it was not satisfied with the 2010 outcome. Otherwise it would just have chosen the same means of outright repression without concern for the loss of life.

From the Israeli government’s perspective, the management of the 2011 flotilla was a great success compared to 2010 and it seemed to solve the dilemma the activists were trying to create. Combining the responses above resulted in a rather successful containment of the flotilla without Israel being the subject of severe international criticism and without having to make any changes in the blockade conditions. At first the bureaucratic obstacles, the sabotage and the Greek travel ban meant that the travel plans were postponed, something which also resulted in internal frictions within the flotilla coalition about how best to handle the situation. Eventually, all but one boat cancelled their plans to go to Gaza, and the single ship approaching Gaza was very manageable for the IDF. Unlike the killings in 2010 which was an obvious attack, it was much more difficult for the flotilla organisers to present all the low-level pacifying tactics and obstacles put in front of the flotilla in 2011 as excessive.

Many of the responses mentioned above can be reported as facts that something happened, but we will probably never know who was behind it. It is a fact that

two boats were sabotaged, that there existed a fake Henning Mankell page, that flags were repealed, the French office broken into, the Swedish webpage attacked, and the Swiss company decided not to sell cement as promised. Much of this might have been orchestrated by Israeli authorities, but it also seems likely that at least some of it was caused by groups or individuals supporting the Israeli government. When analysing responses, it is important to make a distinction between what *actions* someone took and what the *result* was. Likewise, one should be careful in interpreting conclusions about who is responsible for what. Although the Israeli state had an obvious interest in obstructing the flotilla, motive is not the same as proof.

Counter-strategies

Responses to Nonviolent Campaigns (Sørensen, 2015) also includes some general suggestions for counter-strategies when actions, movements and campaigns come under attack in subtle and less subtle ways. Some counter-strategies can be prepared in advance when activists plan for actions and think about possible scenarios. Below I elaborate on these ideas and use the example of the Freedom Flotilla to illustrate some of the possibilities. General suggestions include how to work on a respectable reputation, documenting what is happening and exposing the strategies of the opponents. Regarding intimidations through threats and violence, possibilities include creating local and international solidarity networks and considering the use of tactics of dispersion in order to reduce the risk. When it comes to reframing, one idea is to see if derogatory terms used by the opponent might be adopted and reinterpreted to the campaign's advantage, like the term "queer" which the queer movement has turned into a mark of pride.

When an opponent or third party is devaluing a campaign or its members, the main issue is how to show that they are valuable members of society. If the participants in a demonstration are being called scum, you aim to get the most respected members of society to walk in the first row, presenting and conducting themselves in ways that would make it difficult to an audience to accept the scum label. Determining who will be widely seen as respectable depends on the society in question, but celebrities, nuns or grannies with a non-threatening attitude are effective in many situations. Formally organised groups might consider who they want to accept as members. On some occasions, a small group of respected citizens might be able to achieve more than an unruly crowd. In the case of the Freedom Flotilla, the participants were devalued as terrorists. To counter this devaluation, it is important to behave in a way that counters the stereotype of terrorists as dangerous, secretive and menacing. An example of this that the Flotilla organisers did was to invite the UN, the Red Cross, the EU or "any other independent body to conduct a thorough search, before and/or during our sail. To pre-empt the argument that we may acquire weapons or other material that can pose a threat to Israel's security, we invite the same inspections of our vessels, cargo and passengers upon our safe arrival

in Gaza” (Ship to Gaza Sweden, 2011a). However, even with counter-strategies like this, it is an unequal battle in terms of resources.

When it comes to countering the sanctions enforced by authorities, the organisations and individuals participating in a campaign must minimize compromising factors that can be used against them. In order to prevent the enforcement of sanctions, it is necessary to think ahead about what might possibly be used as excuses for hindering the campaign, and follow the rulebook down to the comma. Once enforcement has taken place, it is a question of exposing overly-repressive reactions and using these to the campaign’s advantage. When it comes to the Freedom Flotilla, there is a major difference between the far-reaching consequences of the Greek travel ban and interceptions of boats on the one hand and the annoyingly rigid enforcement of detailed rules and regulations. Once almost all the boats were in Greek harbours and the travel ban issued, there was probably little the organisers could do about it. The only boat which did leave Greece and approached Gaza was the French *Dignité al-Karama*. Its counter-strategy against the Greek travel ban was deception – it stated that its destination was Alexandria in Egypt, but sailed towards Gaza before it was intercepted by the Israeli military (Sherwood, 2011). However, as a general planning strategy, to avoid situations like the Greek travel ban is a question of not putting all of one’s eggs in the same basket. No one saw the Greek travel ban coming, but in hindsight it would have been better if the boats had approached Gaza from different places. When it comes to the numerous small incidents with the harbour authorities, an important counter-strategy would be to document all of them and communicate the absurdity of the demands and the unfairness in being treated differently from other boats.

Some responses are disruptive beyond the enforcement of rules and regulations. Again, there is a difference between thinking ahead to take measures before the possible disruptions take place and knowing what to do after they have happened. One possibility to counter these disruptions is to document the incident. Write down all the trivial and minor incidents, which taken alone do not look like much, but when combined demonstrate a systematic strategy of disruption.

One of the main reasons opponents of nonviolent campaigns engage in intimidation of activists is to create fear, hoping to stop ongoing activities and to prevent others from taking actions. Despite this, how to deal with fear and other emotions has received rather limited attention in the literature on nonviolent actions, although some exceptions exist. One of the case studies in *The Paradox of Repression and Nonviolent Movements* (Kurtz and Smithey, 2018) is Jennie Williams’ personal account of how women have organised to overcome fear of repression in Zimbabwe. It is a powerful story of how the women in WOZA have organised to protest the conditions that affect their everyday lives in spite of brutal beatings and the terrible conditions they face in custody. Among the factors Williams mentions as key to dealing with fear is to plan the protests carefully, and to have leaders who are in the front of the protests be the first to get beaten (Williams, 2018). One of the chapters by the editors also deals with

how culture can be used skilfully to face and stand up to repression through what the authors call the “art” of repression management (Smithey and Kurtz, 2018a). Sørensen and Rigby’s (2017) article “Frontstage and backstage emotion management in civil resistance” explores how activists aim to influence the emotions of others while simultaneously preparing themselves emotinally for activism. When it comes to intimidation, it is easy to claim that people should refuse to be afraid. But managing one’s emotions in the face of repression is not straightforward. Nevertheless, one possible counter-strategy for activists is to use humour. In Serbia, the group Otpor played an important role in bringing down Slobodan Milosevic from power in 2000. In an environment of fear and constant harassment by the regime, Otpor opted for a humorous strategy, with street pranks being one essential aspect. What type of humour is appropriate as a counter-strategy against intimidation will of course depend on the circumstances, but in Serbia the activists have explained that humour was an extremely valuable factor for overcoming both fear and apathy (Sørensen, 2008, Sørensen, 2016, Sombatpoonsiri, 2015).

In the case of the Freedom Flotilla in 2011, the major intimidating responses were the sabotage of two boats. I have already mentioned the importance of documentation as a counter-strategy, but in contested situations, it is also important to consider who is documenting facts. For instance, it was not unreasonable to expect the Freedom Flotilla to be exposed to sabotage, and prepare in advance for an independent and trusted organisation to be ready to document suspected sabotage. Announcing this prepared plan might have discouraged the potential saboteurs, and even if deterrence had not been effective, it could have decreased the risk of a side-tracked discussion about whether an act is sabotage or not.

Regarding the manipulative responses of *placating* and *co-opting*, both are concerned with influencing the campaign, while *misinforming* and *reframing* are more directed towards the general public. In order to deal with the first two, the campaign organisers must be prepared for the response and have a plan before it occurs. To remain united about what is central to the campaign is essential in order to avoid being overwhelmed by the divide-and-conquer approach from an opponent. When facing lies and other forms of misinformation, campaign organisers have the general options of trying to counter it with facts, or simply ignoring it in order to not bring more attention to the misinformation activities. What is feasible and wise will depend on how damaging the misinformation is, its origin and how much attention it gets. A possible counter-strategy is also for campaign organisers to create their own disinformation. As mentioned above, the boat *Dignité al-Karama* managed to leave Greek waters due to deception. However, some people might consider deceptions and misinformation morally wrong or contrary to the principles of nonviolence. On a more general note about reframing, campaign organisers can potentially learn a lot from the marketing and media sectors regarding the possibility of reaching an audience with a language based on emotions rather than rational arguments. As Stephen Duncombe has argued in order to encourage progressive movements to be more visionary and learn from the

entertainment industry, it does not matter how true an argument is if nobody believes in it (Duncombe, 2007). In practice this means that the narrative a campaign can create about its activities are more important than what the activities actually are.

The type of manipulative responses the Freedom Flotilla was facing in 2011 was mainly about misinformation and reframing. Tracing the origins of misinformation that appear online is time consuming and might not always be worth it if a good counter-strategy is available. For instance, when the misinformation that the flotilla was transporting arms to Hamas was circulating, it seemed to be a smart counter-move to invite everyone to inspect the ships.

Another counter-strategy might simply be to ignore some types of manipulative responses. Groups can encourage members to remain focused on the core message and avoid getting side-tracked into meaningless arguments about things that cannot be proved. Since misinformation might be related to devaluing the campaign, it might be worth looking into who can be the most appropriate representatives of the campaign; people with certain professions or respectability which counters the image spread via disinformation can play an important role as public faces for the movement. For instance, when the misinformation regarding the flotilla was about someone claiming to be gay being denied participation, the person countering this can be a member of the flotilla who is openly homosexual.

The non-interfering responses of *expressing confusion/bewilderment* and *misunderstanding* indicate that campaign organisers will have to be clearer in how they communicate their message. This is not something which appear to be relevant for the Flotilla, but many campaigns struggle with the fact that audiences simply do not get what they are trying to say.

The manipulative responses of *ignoring/avoiding* and *expressing disapproval* are completely legitimate responses and campaign organisers will simply have to try harder to convince others. During the 2011 Freedom Flotilla, the flotilla organisers felt that media were ignoring them to a large degree. The bureaucratic obstacles they were subject to from Greece were simply not newsworthy enough from a media perspective. Above I touched on the importance of documenting facts, something which might be useful when exposed to the subtler tactics from opponents and their supporters which might not hit the headlines. Documenting all small incidents systematically might increase the newsworthiness. One incident of a repealed flag, cement which is not delivered or “routine inspection” from the harbour authorities might not look like much, but a list of 100 different interruptions could be a different story.

Both activists and researchers still have much to learn when it comes to developing and understanding the potential of different counter-strategies. Researchers can look into past cases to see how the interaction of campaign initiatives, responses and counter-strategies evolved and if aspects of the

interaction have a more general character. Activists can consciously work on this aspect of their campaign and systematically document the options they consider and explain why they make the choices they do. Researcher-activists with a foot in both “camps” can use their skills as researchers to develop more elaborate participatory action research.

Conclusion

The model of responses presented here is intended to be a starting point for activists and academics interested in analysing how opponents and so-called third parties respond to various forms of nonviolent campaigns. The present version is not to be taken as the final word on this matter, and the different categories are not always mutually exclusive. Yet these can serve as a useful point of departure for comparing cases, analysing what went wrong, planning future action and understanding how to counter undesirable responses. There is much to be learned in the future when it comes to this under-explored area, and activists and academics can work on different possibilities and test them in practice.

When the first Freedom Flotilla approached Gaza in 2010, it was nothing new to attempt to break the blockade of Gaza by boat, but the scale of the action was unprecedented. The event was a severe dilemma for the Israeli state, and the killing of nine activists caused a considerable PR problem for Israeli authorities. Thus, the Israeli government was determined to avoid a similar outcome the following year. Instead, the government used a whole range of strategies designed to discredit, manipulate and disrupt the flotilla’s attempt to reach Gaza in 2011. In this analysis, I have primarily focused on the two main actors, the flotilla organisers and the Israeli state and its direct supporters. However, an action like this involves many more stakeholders and future research should address what role their reactions played. For instance, the organisers of the Freedom Flotilla were not only directing their message towards the occupying power, but also wanted to send the message to the population of Gaza that it was not forgotten and support Palestinians both in the rest of the occupied territories and in exile.

This article is based on public sources about the flotilla and the notes of one of the participants. The purpose has not been to make an exhaustive evaluation of the 2011 flotilla, but to better understand the nuances in the reactions and to explore the changes between 2010 and 2011. The limitation of this type of sources is of course that we cannot get further than observing what actions actors take and use reason to get an idea regarding what the Israeli state and its supporters appear to attempt. We can only speculate as to their *intentions*, and whether they *succeed* in their efforts is of course a different question. This leaves many questions unanswered; future research about the flotillas should include interviews with those who represented the IDF and the Israeli and Greek governments in this case to provide more insight into their reasoning and

intentions. One of the key questions in this case is what pressure caused the Greek state to issue the travel ban.

When it comes to the question of the degree to which the Israeli state succeeded in its efforts, it is clear that the 2011 flotilla did not get close to breaking the blockade and did not achieve the media attention it had the year before. The analysis also showed that organisations like the UN, EU and different European countries actively discouraged people from participating in the flotilla. However, important questions for future research would be to find out to what degree the attitudes of “ordinary people” around the world were affected by Israeli propaganda. It seems likely that the “message” of the flotillas was interpreted in different ways by populations and authorities around the world, and there exists no such thing as one definitive interpretation of events.

Appendix A: Framework of responses

Validating Responses

- Supporting
- Acknowledging

Responses of Discrediting and Attacking

- Devaluing
- Enforcing Sanctions
- Disrupting
- Intimidating

Manipulative Responses (new category)

- Placating
- Co-opting
- Misinforming
- Reframing

Non-interfering Responses

- Ignoring and Avoiding
- Expressing Confusion/ Bewilderment
- Expressing Disapproval
- Misunderstanding

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