DIGITAL DIPLOMACY AS DENIAL: ISRAEL'S STRATEGIC RESPONSE TO FAMINE ALLEGATIONS AND GENOCIDE ACCUSATIONS IN GAZA

Muhammad Alfian Maulana
Departement of Political Science
Udayana University, Bali, Indonesia
alfian_maulana@unud.ac.id

Abstrak
Studi ini meneliti bagaimana Israel menggunakan diplomasi digital sebagai strategi penyangkalan dalam menanggapi tuduhan internasional mengenai penggunaan kelaparan sebagai senjata perang dan pembunuhan massal di Gaza. Dengan menggunakan Teori Komunikasi Krisis Situasional (SCCT) W. Timothy Coombs, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi pola penyangkalan sistematis yang mencakup tiga strategi utama: menyerang penuduh, penyangkalan langsung, dan pengkambinghitaman. Melalui analisis deskriptif kualitatif, studi ini mengungkapkan bahwa komunikasi digital Israel bertindak sebagai mekanisme manajemen krisis yang terkoordinasi, bukan upaya penyampaian pesan publik yang spontan. Strategi menyerang penuduh bertujuan untuk mendelegitimasi lembaga-lembaga seperti Mahkamah Pidana Internasional (ICC) dengan menggambarkan mereka sebagai lembaga yang bias atau bermotivasi politik. Strategi penyangkalan menciptakan narasi alternatif yang menggambarkan Gaza sebagai wilayah yang tidak terpengaruh oleh kelaparan, sementara strategi pengkambinghitaman mengalihkan tanggung jawab moral dan hukum kepada Hamas. Temuan menyimpulkan bahwa komunikasi digital yang dipimpin negara dapat secara efektif meniadakan krisis kemanusiaan yang terbukti secara empiris dan membentuk kembali narasi moral seputar konflik bersenjata.

_____

Abstract
This study examines how Israel employs digital diplomacy as a strategy of denial in response to international accusations regarding the use of starvation as a weapon of war and mass murder in Gaza. Utilizing W. Timothy Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the research identifies a systematic pattern of denial that includes three key strategies: attacking the accuser, outright denial, and scapegoating. Through qualitative descriptive analysis, the study reveals that Israel's digital communication acts as a coordinated crisis management mechanism, rather than a spontaneous public messaging effort. The strategy of attacking the accuser seeks to delegitimize institutions such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) by portraying them as biased or politically motivated. The denial strategy creates an alternative narrative that illustrates Gaza as being unaffected by starvation, while the scapegoating strategy shifts moral and legal responsibility onto Hamas. The findings conclude that state-led digital communication can effectively negate empirically substantiated humanitarian crises and reshape the moral narrative surrounding armed conflict.

INTRODUCTION

International conflict in the 21st century has undergone a fundamental transformation. The battlefield is no longer confined to the physical realm; it has expanded significantly into the digital space, where narratives, perceptions, and truths are contested with an intensity equal to that of military confrontations. In this new arena, digital diplomacy has evolved from a mere tool for promoting a country's image and fostering dialogue into a sophisticated strategic instrument used as a weapon in information warfare. A clear and urgent example of this phenomenon is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict following the events of October 7, 2023, which quickly escalated from a regional military conflict into a global humanitarian crisis centered on the Gaza Strip.

The attacks on October 7, 2023, prompted an Israeli military response of unprecedented scale and intensity in Gaza. This extended military campaign soon led to a horrific humanitarian crisis. The collapse of education and health systems, along with the forced displacement of a large portion of the population and the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, has generated a situation described by various international aid organizations as a humanitarian catastrophe (Hassoun et al., 2025). The suffering peaked when the world was confronted with undeniable evidence of mass starvation. This critical moment occurred on August 22, 2025, when the Famine Review Committee of the IPC, a global authority on food security analysis, issued an official statement declaring that a famine had occurred in the Gaza Strip (Haan et al., 2025)

This declaration was not made lightly; it was based on empirical data. The IPC report indicates that over half a million Palestinians have fallen into extreme food insecurity (IPC Phase 5), the threshold at which deaths from malnutrition begin to occur on a massive scale (The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Report, 2025). By mid-September 2025, at least 440 people, including 147 children, were reported to have died from malnutrition (Chughtai, 2025). The IPC and United Nations (UN) experts clearly emphasize that this famine is not a result of natural disasters or crop failures. Instead, it has been described as a "man-made crisis" directly caused by deliberate policies (Burke & Tantesh, 2025). Concerns about Israel's intentional actions stem from severe and prolonged restrictions on humanitarian access, systematic

destruction of local food sources like agricultural land and fisheries, and bureaucratic obstacles that hinder the delivery of vital aid (Asmar, 2025).

Amid this deepening humanitarian crisis, international legal proceedings began to advance in pursuit of accountability. In January 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued a historic interim ruling, stating that South Africa's allegations of genocide against Israel were "plausible." This decision sent shockwaves around the world and provided a legal basis for closer scrutiny of Israel's actions (Becker, 2025). This legal process culminated on November 21, 2024, when the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant (International Criminal Court, 2025).

The ICC's charges are specific and serious. The warrant states that there are "reasonable grounds to believe" that the two officials are criminally responsible for war crimes, including "starvation as a method of warfare" and crimes against humanity (Aljazeera, 2024). The ICC Pre-Trial Chamber concluded that there is evidence indicating that they had "intentionally and deliberately deprived the civilian population

in Gaza of objects essential for their survival" (International Criminal Court, 2024). These allegations are supported by reports from various leading human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which independently concluded that Israel's campaign constituted "deliberate starvation" and was part of "genocidal violence" (Verdeja, 2025).

Faced with a mountain of empirical evidence from humanitarian agencies and legal proceedings from the world's highest judicial bodies, Israel initiated a massive counterattack—not on the physical battlefield, but in the digital arena. This response marked a shift in the use of public diplomacy. Rather than engaging in conventional reputation management or attempting to frame its actions positively, Israel's campaign represents a systematic attempt to deny reality itself. It is a strategy to create extreme narrative dissonance: a gap so wide between the narrative projected by the state and the verified conditions on the ground that it challenges fundamental assumptions about the role of truth in international communication.

This large-scale denial strategy, while surprising in its intensity, is actually an escalation of a trend identified by recent

academic literature. Researchers characterize Israel's digital diplomacy as a complex strategic instrument. The literature on public diplomacy during times of conflict highlights a fundamental shift in the objectives of state communication. Ecaterina Hlihor (2024), in her work "Public Diplomacy in Time of War: Israel's War on Gaza Case Study", emphasizes that wartime contexts fundamentally alter the purpose of public diplomacy from fostering mutual understanding to promoting the state's subjective position. In such situations, there is an urgent need to correct misperceptions and restore trust. Consequently, public diplomacy aims to promote a desired image while countering perceived propaganda or misinformation (Hlihor, 2024).

Lucía Martínez Plazas (2024) identifies specific tactics used in this shift of public diplomacy focus towards narrative polarization. She notes that on social media, Israel employs a combination of Nation-Branding and Nation-Shaming strategies through its official accounts (@Israel and @IDF), consistently calling for support while portraying itself as the sole victim. This pattern has persisted since the attacks of October 7, 2023. Additionally, Martínez Plazas highlights that hashtags have transitioned from being informative to conveying clear political messages, which are integral to this Nation-Branding and Nation-Shaming approach (Plazas, 2024). This illustrates how digital communication tools are actively employed to build a positive self-image while undermining the legitimacy of opposing narratives, positioning Israel as a resilient and innocent party facing a tainted enemy.

Complementing these tactical observations, Lisa Tegeback (2024) provides a theoretical framework by framing these practices as the "weaponization of narratives" that legitimizes military actions. Tegeback argues that this strategic narrative explicitly aims to align Israel's actions with Western values (such as democracy, human rights, and the fight against radical terrorism), which are essential for garnering international support. This narrative emphasizes not only self-defense but also the formation of a collective identity that connects the state with a population that identifies with these "Western values" (Tegeback, 2024). Therefore, digital diplomacy becomes a crucial tool for leveraging soft power, where narratives serve as compelling stories about the past to explain the present and future while simultaneously creating a shared identity.

While the literature has effectively mapped strategic communication tactics like nation-branding and nation-shaming on social media (Plazas, 2024) and examined the shifting goals of public diplomacy during times of war (Hlihor, 2024), there remains a significant analytical gap. Existing studies have not sufficiently analyzed how this "weaponization of narrative" operates at the extreme level in the context of documented humanitarian crises and international legal processes. Specifically, there has been no exploration of how massive paid digital campaigns are used to deny official declarations of famine in conflict zones. Moreover, there has been an absence of studies examining how these denial narratives are deliberately crafted to obstruct international legal accountability mechanisms, particularly concerning genocide allegations at the International Court of Justice.

This identified literature gap—namely, the insufficient analysis of how "narrative weaponization" is applied in extreme situations during humanitarian crises and international legal processes—raises the central research question that guides this study: How does Israel operationalize its digital diplomacy as a systematic denial strategy to counter allegations of using starvation as a method of warfare and genocide? This question aims to explore beyond simply identifying general messages (like nation-branding and nation-shaming) and focuses on the deliberate mechanisms behind the denial strategy. By addressing this question, the study offers originality by framing Israel's official digital output not as a series of isolated messages but as a coherent and deliberate denial strategy. Its innovation lies in providing a systematic analysis of how digital diplomacy is utilized not only to project narratives but also to actively deny empirical realities, potentially undermining inclusive global communication and international legal accountability mechanisms. This study seeks to uncover the structure behind the "continuum of denial" that makes denial a persistent instrument of foreign diplomacy.

ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

In the contemporary digital era, political and humanitarian crises are contested not only on the physical battlefield but also in the symbolic realm through discourse, imagery, and digital narratives. As modern political actors, states no longer fight only to win military wars but also to perceive

wars that determine moral legitimacy in the eyes of the global public. In the context of allegations of genocide and the use of starvation as a weapon of war in Gaza, Israel's strategic digital response demonstrates how political communication and digital diplomacy function as highly structured crisis management mechanisms. To understand the patterns and objectives of this communication, this study uses Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) as its main framework.

The SCCT theory was developed by W. Timothy Coombs (2007) to explain how organisations, including countries, manage communication during crises to maintain their reputation and public trust. The core of this theory is that every crisis threatens the legitimacy and credibility of actors, thereby requiring a communication strategy tailored to the level of responsibility and the public's perception of the situation. Coombs emphasises that crisis communication strategies are not merely spontaneous reactions to accusations, but strategic actions designed to control perceptions and minimise damage to reputation (Coombs, 2007).

SCCT departs from the assumption that public perception of a crisis is shaped by two main factors: (1) attribution of responsibility, which is the extent to which the public views an actor as the cause of the crisis, and (2) the level of reputational threat posed by the crisis (W. T. Coombs, 2007) . Based on these two factors, Coombs developed a typology of communication strategies known as "postures", a series of communication attitudes organisations use to respond to crises: deny, diminish, rebuild, and bolster.

This study focuses on the deny posture, a communication pattern that separates the actor's responsibility from the crisis at hand. Within the SCCT framework, the deny posture aims to reject or remove the causal link between the organisation and the adverse event, assuming that maintaining a symbolic distance from the crisis will protect the organisation's moral and political legitimacy. Coombs (2007) outlines three primary forms of this denial strategy: (1) Attack the accuser by attacking the accuser's credibility by stating that the accusations are biased, invalid, or politically motivated. This strategy is used to shift public focus from the substance of the allegations to the credibility of their source (Coombs, 1995, p. 451); (2) Denial involves rejecting direct involvement in the crisis and stating that the accusations have no empirical basis. This strategy is often accompanied by the presentation of counter-evidence that reinforces the denial claim (Coombs, 1995); (3) Scapegoating, which

involves blaming external parties, whether individuals, organisations, or other groups, as the cause of the crisis, to shift moral and legal responsibility from the leading actor to another entity (Coombs, 1995).

These three strategies work rhetorically and psychologically to create "epistemic distance", which is the cognitive distance between the perpetrator and the crisis. In digital diplomacy, this strategy is operationalised through social media, online press releases, campaign videos, and infographics, reinforcing the country's positive image while rejecting accusations.

The application of SCCT in this study helps explain how Israel's digital diplomacy functions as a structured method of denial regarding accusations of using starvation as a tactic of warfare and genocide in Gaza.

First, the strategy of attacking the accuser is evident in Israel's efforts to discredit international institutions such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the ICC, and various humanitarian organizations. Israel accuses these entities of being "anti-Israel" or linked to terrorist groups. This narrative undermines the credibility of these institutions and fosters

public skepticism about the validity of humanitarian reports.

Second, the denial strategy is reflected in a series of official digital posts from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). These posts feature images of bustling Gaza markets, the distribution of humanitarian aid, and civilians engaging in their daily activities. This visual representation creates the impression that "there is no hunger in Gaza," framing the crisis as exaggerated by the international media.

Third, the scapegoating strategy becomes apparent as Israel identifies Hamas as the primary actor responsible for the crisis. Israel accuses Hamas of hoarding aid, obstructing food distribution, and using civilians as human shields. According to SCCT, scapegoating allows states to shift moral focus and legal responsibility from their own actions to non-state actors.

By applying SCCT, this study interprets Israel's digital diplomacy not just as an external communication activity, but as a mechanism for managing political reputation crises on a global scale. The denial posture in the digital realm enables the state to maintain moral legitimacy while mitigating international legal pressures. This

approach also illustrates why digital communication is performative rather than purely informative; its aim is to convey facts and shape global public perceptions and emotions.

Thus, the SCCT framework allows for a comprehensive analysis of Israel's digital crisis management, encompassing strategy, objectives, and political implications. This approach highlights how digital diplomacy erodes the symbolic connection between the state and humanitarian crises, while also maintaining moral legitimacy amidst increasing global scrutiny of human rights violations.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study utilizes a descriptive qualitative approach to examine how the Israeli government implements a crisis communication strategy characterized by a denial posture through its digital diplomacy. Specifically, it investigates allegations of using starvation as a method of warfare and genocide in Gaza. A descriptive qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows researchers to explore the communication strategies employed to maintain political and moral legitimacy in the digital sphere, rather than merely assessing the frequency or intensity of messages.

The theoretical framework for this study is based on SCCT, developed by W. Timothy Coombs in 2007. This theory analyzes various forms of denial communication (denial posture) used by state actors during a reputational crisis. Drawing on SCCT, this analysis focuses on three primary denial strategies: (1) attacking the accuser, which involves undermining the credibility of the individual making the allegations; (2) denial, which is the outright rejection of any involvement or responsibility for the crisis; and (3) scapegoating, which shifts blame onto external parties.

To ensure a focused analysis, data collection utilized a purposive sampling method, selecting digital materials that explicitly addressed international allegations concerning the humanitarian crisis. The research scope was restricted to official English-language communication channels primarily targeting a global audience. Specifically, the study analyzed content from the official accounts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (@IsraelMFA), the State of Israel (@Israel), and the Israel Defense Forces (@IDF) on three major platforms: X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and YouTube. These platforms were chosen due to their high engagement rates and their roles as

primary conduits for Israel's international public diplomacy.

The study covers the period from January 2024 to October 2025. This timeframe was strategically selected to capture the full trajectory of the legal and humanitarian crisis: starting with the ICJ interim ruling on the plausibility of genocide in early 2024, progressing through the declaration of famine by the IPC in August 2025, and culminating in the ICC's issuance of arrest warrants in late 2024 along with subsequent reactions.

The selection logic for the digital materials adhered to strict inclusion criteria: (1) the content must be produced by the specified official state agencies; (2) the narrative must directly respond to, refute, or reframe allegations of starvation, aid obstruction, or genocide; and (3) the materials must use textual or visual elements related to the denial posture (e.g., images of food markets, attacks on the credibility of UNRWA/ICC). Purely tactical military updates unrelated to humanitarian aid or legal accountability were excluded from the dataset.

To ensure the validity and credibility of the data, this study employed source triangulation, comparing digital findings with reports from independent institutions such as UNRWA, Human Rights Watch, and the ICC. This approach guarantees that the researchers' interpretations are not solely subjective but can also be empirically verified. Through this methodological design, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Israel employs digital diplomacy as a systematic tool for denial in managing its reputation crisis on a global scale.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
The Operationalization of Denial in Digital Diplomacy

The humanitarian collapse in Gaza following the October 7, 2023 attacks placed Israel under unprecedented international scrutiny, culminating in the ICJ's investigation into genocide allegations and the ICC's pursuit of arrest warrants (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), 2025) (International Criminal Court, 2025). Our analysis reveals that in response to these empirical and legal threats, Israel's digital diplomacy shifted from conventional nation-branding to a defensive Deny Posture. Instead of addressing the substance of the famine and genocide allegations, the state's digital

output functioned as a coordinated crisis management mechanism aimed at severing the symbolic link between Israeli military policy and the humanitarian catastrophe.

Consistent with the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), this study identifies that Israel's denial was not a spontaneous reaction but a structured strategy operationalized through three reinforcing tactics: (1) attacking the accuser to degrade the credibility of international monitors; (2) outright denial to construct an alternative visual reality of normalcy; and (3) scapegoating to shift moral and legal culpability entirely onto Hamas. In the following section, we will provide a detailed explanation of Israel's efforts to refute allegations of genocide and justify its right to self-defense.

Deny Posture as Israel's Main Digital Diplomacy Strategy

A theoretical framework is useful for analyzing and understanding the communication strategies employed by Israel in its digital self-defense efforts. SCCT categorizes crisis communication strategies into four types: deny, diminish, rebuild, and bolster (Coombs, 2007). Among these, the 'deny posture' is the most confrontational, as it aims to sever the connection between the

actor (Israel) and the crisis (such as human rights violations or genocide). This strategy is used when a country seeks to reject accusations against it, arguing that these claims are invalid or irrelevant to the actual situation.

In the context of Israel's narrative during the conflict in Gaza, digital diplomacy prominently features the deny posture. This is executed through three primary tactics: attacking the accuser, denial of the accusations, and scapegoating. These tactics are interrelated and work together as a coordinated discourse to distance Israel's military actions from the allegations of humanitarian violations by shifting the focus and blaming other parties.

Attack the Accuser: Undermining the Credibility of the Accuser

The tactic of "attacking the accuser" plays a central role in Israel's digital response to international reports regarding the crisis in Gaza. According to the SCCT developed by Coombs (2007), this strategy aims to divert attention from the substance of the allegations—such as claims of starvation or genocide—and instead focuses on undermining the credibility of the accuser. This approach is implemented through official channels, including the MFA and the

IDF on the X (Twitter) platform, as well as during press conferences and official briefings to the international media.

A clear example of this strategy was articulated by Eden Bar Tal, Israel's Director General of Foreign Affairs, who directly questioned the credibility of the IPC report, which indicated that famine existed in Gaza. In his statement, Bar Tal labeled the IPC report as "forged" and "fabricated" for political purposes, accusing it of supporting what he termed a "false famine campaign" by Hamas. He alleged that the IPC manipulated data by artificially inflating the number of deaths to meet the criteria for declaring famine, violating its own methodological standards (such as the use of clinical samples and non-standard indicators), selectively using child survey data, and concealing initial survey results that did not support the famine conclusion (Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025).

The accusations against the IPC were subsequently amplified on the X (Twitter) platform through the official accounts of the Israeli Government, specifically the Israel Foreign Ministry (@IsraelMFA) and Israel ישראל (@Israel). These two accounts served as the primary channels for disseminating the "attack the accuser" narrative, transforming

media briefings into easily consumable and shareable digital content. The format of posts from these accounts (as shown in Figure 1a and Figure 1b) indicates a concerted effort to discredit international institutions by presenting allegations of data manipulation and political bias as established facts to a global audience.

Figure 1a.

Source: X/Twitter (@IsraelMFA dan @Israel)
Official Government of Israel (2025)

Figure 1b

Source: X/Twitter (@IsraelMFA dan @Israel) Official Government of Israel (2025)

This digital narrative significantly influences public perception, particularly by creating a situation where the global audience struggles to determine who is right or which sources can be trusted (Hutagalung & Nurhasanah, 2025). Posts that label reports, such as hunger statistics, as "compiled based on false data" or "sourced from the Hamas terrorist network" aim to divide public opinion and delegitimize the information source. Consequently, this epistemic fragmentation leads to polarized international discourse, where accusations against Israel lose moral authority in the eyes of audiences sensitive to anti-bias or anti-terrorism narratives. Thus, attacking the accuser symbolizes an effort to monopolize the

understanding of the crisis: Israel is striving to define the truth about Gaza and determine who should be deemed a manipulative party worthy of discredit.

Moreover, Israel's strategy of denial extends beyond undermining the credibility of formal institutions, such as the IPC; it also covers broader social and individual spheres, including independent journalists, academics, and human rights activists. Israel utilizes digital narratives to target these individuals who provide critical documentation of its military actions.

This tactic reached a peak when Israel explicitly associated individuals with institutions to reinforce allegations of bias. For instance, one of the authors of the IPC report was accused of sharing anti-Israel, pro-Hamas, and pro-Houthi content on social media platform X/Twitter, which was then used as key evidence to suggest a "political motivation" behind the report (The Times of Israel, 2025).

By collectively branding these individuals as "propaganda agents," "supporters of terrorism," or "Hamas mouthpieces," Israel has effectively broadened its denial strategy, integrating it into state communications. This expansion indicates a systematic effort to create an information sanctions zone where any
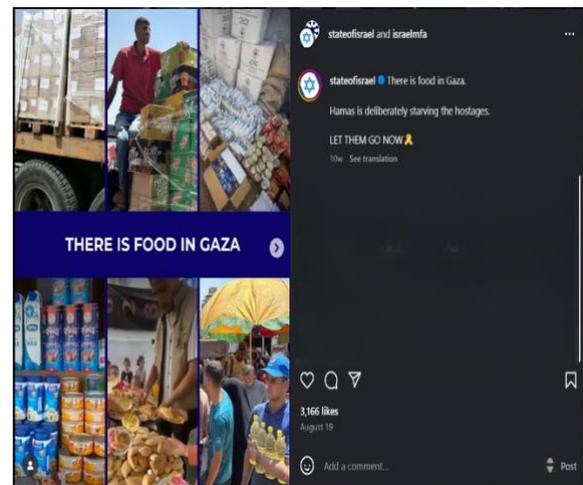
individual or organization, regardless of their expertise, can be dismissed if their narrative contradicts the state's official narrative. Consequently, this strategy seeks to deny accusations and actively obstructs the process of inclusive fact-checking, positioning digital communication as a defensive shield aimed at undermining the global accountability infrastructure.

Denial: Rejecting Allegations and Creating Alternative Realities

The second tactic in the denial posture framework is pure denial, which involves directly rejecting allegations or causal links between an actor's actions and the resulting crisis (Coombs, 2007). In the context of Israel, this strategy is prominently demonstrated through the production of visual and narrative content that deliberately portrays Gaza as being in a "normal" state, safe, and with sufficient access to food resources. For instance, posts from official accounts like the MFA and the IDF on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube regularly showcase videos of bustling markets in Gaza, abundant displays of fruits and vegetables, and children happily playing in the streets. Examples of these visual displays can be seen in Figure 2a and Figure

2b. These images are often accompanied by straightforward narrative captions like "There is food in Gaza" or "Life continues as usual." This practice represents a sophisticated form of visual reframing, leveraging the power of digital media to create an alternate reality that directly contradicts the empirical evidence provided by formal humanitarian agencies, such as the IPC and the World Food Programme (WFP). As a result, it undermines the global consensus on the severity of the crisis.

Figure 2a

Source: Instagram (@israelmfa & @israelmfa) dan Youtube (@IsraelMFA) The Israeli Government (2025)

Figure 2b

Source: Instagram (@israelmfa & @israelmfa) dan Youtube (@IsraelMFA) The Israeli Government (2025)

According to the principles of SCCT, Israel's denial strategy fundamentally aims to eliminate the damaging symbolic association between the country and the crisis of famine or genocide. This is achieved by presenting a more convincing counter-narrative (Coombs, 2015). In practice, Israel utilizes visual representations of prosperity and normality to drastically reframe the perception of suffering. This strategy shifts the narrative from a disaster attributed to military actions to a situation of deprivation that is exaggerated by critics.

On a subtle psychological level, when the global public is consistently exposed to positive images, the collective perception of the crisis changes from "clear state responsibility" to viewing it as "an issue inflated by propaganda." Consequently, this denial narrative is a calculated attempt to absolve Israel of responsibility, casting doubt on the reality of the crisis rather than directly addressing the allegations against it.

Moreover, Israel's denial strategy goes beyond merely describing conditions on the ground; it also operates on a deeper normative and moral level. For example, the assertion that "there is no starvation" is not simply a factual denial of food availability but serves as a moral framing. Israel positions itself as a country that upholds humanitarian and democratic values, implying that it could not possibly engage in actions that contradict these values or use them as a method of warfare. Thus, this denial strategy serves a dual purpose: it combines a strong moral defense with extensive image repair into a single, coherent narrative (An example of this moral narrative can be seen in Figure 3). This approach aims to maintain the country's moral standing in the eyes of its international allies while reinforcing Israel's self-image as a nation that acts in accordance with the law, even during intense conflicts.

Figure 3

Source: The official X/Twitter account (@israelMFA) of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Scapegoating: Shifting Responsibility to Hamas

The third form of denial in crisis communication is scapegoating, which involves the strategic act of shifting the primary responsibility for a crisis to an external party. According to Coombs (2007), in SCCT, this strategy is used to maintain a moral distance from the crisis. In this context, the leading actor, in this case, the state, claims that another party, rather than itself, is the main cause of the events or suffering.
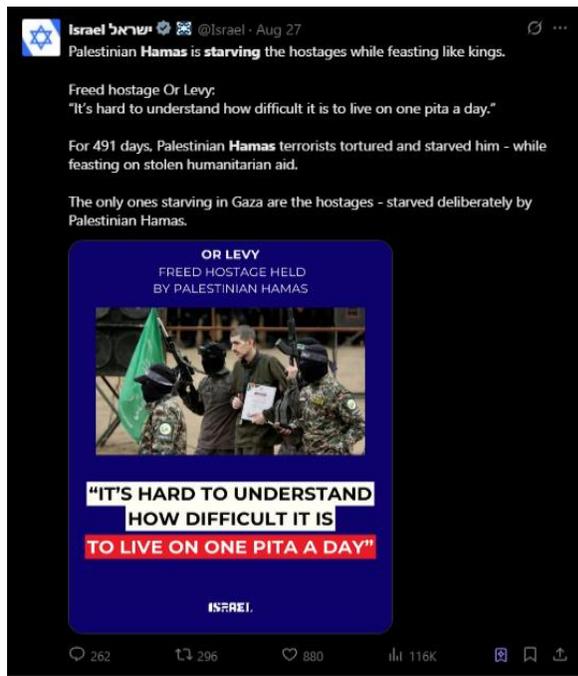
In relation to the suffering in Gaza, reports from the IPC indicate a widespread threat of famine due to limited access to food.

Israeli digital diplomacy frequently positions Hamas as the primary perpetrator of this suffering. This scapegoating narrative is framed in a stark moral contrast that specifically targets hostages: "Palestinian Hamas is starving the hostages while feasting like kings."

This narrative is reinforced by claims of "stolen aid and feasting," which allege that Hamas terrorists tortured and starved hostages for 491 days "while feasting on stolen humanitarian aid." The testimony of freed hostage Or Levy, who stated, "It's hard to understand how difficult it is to live on one pita a day," serves to highlight the suffering of the hostages (See Figure 4). Israel repeatedly propagates the message that "The only ones starving in Gaza are the hostages – starved deliberately by Palestinian Hamas."

The narrative employs the story of deliberately starved hostages, alongside allegations of theft of aid intended for the people of Gaza, illustrating a clear pattern of scapegoating (Coombs, 2007). In this portrayal, Israel positions itself as acting lawfully and seeking to provide aid, while Hamas is depicted as an evil entity that actively commits crimes (such as torture) and is the primary cause of the hunger crisis, rather than the blockade imposed by Israel.

Figure 4

Source: Official X/Twitter account (@israelMFA) of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs

This scapegoating approach has a significant dual function. Not only does it effectively shift moral responsibility for the suffering of the Gazan people onto Hamas, but it also serves a crucial function in rationalising Israel's military and blockade policies. Suppose all the suffering in Gaza can be constructed as a direct result of Hamas's destructive and manipulative actions (e.g., the use of human shields). In that case, Israel's actions, including air strikes, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, and restrictions on the entry of aid, can be internally framed and defended as a legitimate and proportionate "defensive response". Thus, strategic scapegoating allows Israel to maintain the legitimacy of its foreign and military policies in the eyes of public opinion and the international community, transforming the narrative from one of aggressive action to one of entirely necessary and reactive action.

From the SCCT perspective, scapegoating strategies are often used when the leading actor is highly responsible for the crisis but cannot politically or morally admit to mistakes or negligence (Coombs, 2007). By shifting the cause of the crisis to non-state actors or groups labelled as terrorists, the state can effectively lower public expectations regarding the scope of its own responsibility. This strategy also expands the moral logic in the conflict: if the enemy is constructed as the main perpetrator and eternal source of suffering (as pure evil), then any action taken against them, no matter how destructive, can be ethically justified as an act of fighting evil. This ultimately reinforces Israel's narrative of positioning itself as a victim acting morally against an immoral enemy, thereby freeing itself from strict humanitarian obligations (Coombs, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Israel's digital public diplomacy in the Gaza conflict shows a structured strategic

shift, moving beyond simply conveying information and self-narratives to a systematic denial posture operationalised through three primary tactics: attack the accuser, denial, and scapegoating. This stance is operated through attacking the accuser, which serves to defocus the crisis and shift attention from the substance of the accusation to the credibility of the accuser, such as accusing international institutions of bias or collaboration with extremist groups. This strategy effectively instils epistemic uncertainty, a situation in which the global public finds it difficult to distinguish truth, thereby undermining the moral authority of criticism. This tactic extends to scapegoating, a symbolic attempt to monopolise the epistemology of the crisis, determining who has the right to define truth amid fragmented narratives.

The second tactic, pure denial, is a direct rejection of accusations or causal links between Israeli military actions and the humanitarian crisis. This is manifested through visual reframing on social media, where official accounts disseminate images of Gaza's "normality", such as bustling markets and children playing, which directly negate empirical evidence of starvation reported by humanitarian agencies.

According to SCCT, the main function of denial is to erase the damaging symbolic association between Israel and the crisis. This strategy works on a psychological level, reframing the crisis from "state responsibility" to "exaggerated issues," while also functioning normatively to maintain the moral image that Israel could not possibly commit acts that contradict humanitarian values.

The third form, scapegoating, is a strategic act to maintain moral distance from the crisis by shifting primary responsibility to an external party, namely Hamas. Israeli digital diplomacy consistently uses repetitive narratives such as "Hamas steals aid" or "Hamas uses civilians as human shields". This shifting of responsibility not only transfers moral responsibility but also critically rationalises Israel's military and blockade policies. If the suffering in Gaza is constructed as a result of Hamas' actions, then Israel's harsh actions are seen as a legitimate "defensive response". This strategy allows Israel to lower public expectations of its own responsibility, maintain the legitimacy of its military policies, and reinforce the moral logic that any action against the enemy can be ethically justified.

Overall, Israel's digital diplomacy operates as a coherent and deliberate strategy of denial, aiming not only to project a narrative but also to actively deny the empirical reality of starvation and allegations of international law violations. The complexity of this strategy, which combines attacks on accusers, outright denial of facts, and shifting blame, demonstrates the use of communication as a defensive shield that seeks to undermine the global accountability infrastructure. However, there are limitations to this study: the analysis is largely based on public digital data without access to in-depth audience data (reach and engagement) or massive dark posts (paid advertisements), which makes it difficult to evaluate the real effectiveness of this denial strategy. Therefore, future research should better accommodate this by conducting large-scale analysis of paid advertising data extensively to uncover the scale and geographical targets of denial efforts and their actual impact.

REFERENSI

Aljazeera. (2024). *ICC issues arrest warrant for Israeli PM Netanyahu for 'war crimes' in Gaza.* https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/11/21/icc-issues-arrest-warrant-for-israeli-pm-netanyahu-for-war-crimes-in-gaza

Asmar, I. (2025). Gaza: Between global silence and the double standards of justice. In *Dialogues in health* (Vol. 7, p. 100240). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dialog.2025.100240

Becker, M. A. (2025). Crisis in Gaza: South Africa v Israel at the International Court of Justice (or the Unbearable Lightness of Provisional Measures). *SSRN Electronic Journal.* https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5018178

Burke, J., & Tantesh, M. A. (2025). *UN-backed experts declare famine in and around Gaza City.* https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/aug/22/ipc-declares-famine-gaza-city

Chughtai, A. (2025). *Israel starving Gaza: 440 dead from starvation, including 147 children.* https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/18/israel-starving-gaza-hundreds-of-deaths-including-many-children

Coombs, W. Timothy. (1995). Choosing the Right Words: The Development of Guidelines for the Selection of the "Appropriate" Crisis-Response Strategies. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *8*(4), 447–476. https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318995008004003

Coombs, W. . T. (2007). Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. *Corporate*

Reputation Review, *10*(3), 163–176. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.15 50049

Coombs, W. T. (1995). Choosing the Right Words: The Development of Guidelines for the Selection of the "Appropriate" Crisis-Response Strategies. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *8*(4), 447–476. https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318995008 004003

Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. *Corporate Reputation Review*, *10*(3), 163–176. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.15 50049

Haan, N., Hailey, P., Maxwell, D., Seal, A., Fitzpatrick, M., Jamaluddine, Z., Lopez, J., & Russo, L. (2025). *Famine Review Committee: Gaza Strip, August 2025*. Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Global Support Unit. https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1159596/

Hassoun, A., Parra-López, C., Ben Hassen, T., Ben Abdallah, S., Shehadeh, L., Socol, C. T., Rajeb, A., Mahdi, N., Samadhiya, A., Buheji, M., Ahmed, D., El-Temsah, Y., Khoury, M., Hassoun, A. N., Dankar, I., Althafery, O., Trif, M., & Iriqat, D. (2025). The Gaza conflict and its implications for the sustainable development goals: a comprehensive analysis. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-025-06763-7

Hlihor, E. (2024). Public Diplomacy in Time of War. Israel's War on Gaza Case Study. *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov. Series VII: Social Sciences • Law*, *17*(66), 71–84. https://doi.org/10.31926/BUT.SSL.202 4.17.66.1.13

Hutagalung, M., & Nurhasanah. (2025). Media Framing in the Digital Age: A Narrative Review of Sociopolitical and Cultural Impacts. *Communica : Journal of Communication*, *3*(3 SE-Articles), 164–177. https://doi.org/10.61978/communica.v3 i3.653

Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC). (2025). *Famine Review Committee: Gaza Strip (August 2025)*. IPC Global Initiative. https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user _upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Famine_Rev iew_Committee_Report_Gaza_Aug202 5.pdf

International Criminal Court. (2024). *Statement of ICC Prosecutor Karim A.A. Khan KC: Applications for Arrest Warrants in the Situation in the State of Palestine*. International Criminal Court (ICC). https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-prosecutor-karim-aa-khan-kc-applications-arrest-warrants-situation-state

International Criminal Court. (2025). *Situation in the State of Palestine: ICC Pre-Trial Chamber I Rejects the State of Israel's Challenges*. International Criminal Court (ICC). https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-state-palestine-icc-pre-trial-chamber-i-rejects-state-israels-challenges

Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2025). *LIVE: DG Eden Bar Tal addresses international media, exposing new information on the IPC report*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCGn78gMHRM

Martinez Plazas, L. (2024). *'Half a truth is often a great lie.'* http://hdl.handle.net/2105/75118

Tegeback, L. (2024). *Israel's Soft Power in the Digital Age : An Empirical Case Study of Israel's Digital Diplomacy During the 2023/24 Israel–Hamas War: Vol. Independen*. http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1863279/FULLTEXT01.pdf

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Report. (2025). *GAZA STRIP: Famine confirmed in Gaza Governorate, projected to expand*. IPC. https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/countries-in-focus-archive/issue-134/en/

The Times of Israel. (2025). *Israeli review disputes UN-backed Gaza famine report as biased, methodologically flawed | The*. https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-review-disputes-un-backed-gaza-famine-report-as-biased-methodologically-flawed/

Verdeja, E. (2025). The Gaza Genocide in Five Crises. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2025.2452707