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# Updating the Study of Foreign Policy Crisis: The Case of the *Mavi Marmara Flotilla*

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The study of foreign policy crises (FPC) is integral to foreign policy analysis (FPA). However, since the end of the Cold War, debate on FPC has stalled. The present article seeks to update the existing FPA literature on FPCs. It uses a deductively driven approach to identify gaps in the current FPC literature and demonstrates their relevance for a real-world case of FPC, namely, the *Mavi Marmara flotilla*. The latter is identified as a “least likely” case study which is representative of a broader set of what we refer to as asymmetrical FPCs. Maximizing the inferential leverage entailed by this research design, we advocate for an updated FPA approach to study asymmetrical FPCs that includes actor hybridity, performativity, and social media.

El estudio de crisis en política exterior (FPC) forma parte del análisis de la política exterior (FPA). No obstante, desde el fin de la Guerra Fría, el debate sobre la crisis en política exterior se ha estancado. El presente artículo pretende actualizar la bibliografía existente del análisis de política exterior sobre los estudios de las crisis en política exterior. Utiliza un enfoque deductivo para identificar los vacíos en la documentación actual sobre los estudios de crisis en política exterior y demostrar su importancia en un caso de crisis del mundo real, en concreto, la flotilla del *Mavi Marmara*. Este último se identifica como un caso de estudio “menos probable,” y es representativo de un conjunto más amplio de lo que denominamos “estudios asimétricos de crisis en política exterior.” Maximizando la ventaja inferencial que conlleva este modelo de investigación, abogamos por un enfoque actualizado de los análisis de política exterior para el estudio asimétrico de las crisis en política exterior que incluya la hibridación de actores, la performatividad y los medios de comunicación social.

L'étude des crises de politique étrangère constitue une partie intégrante de l'analyse de la politique étrangère. Cependant, depuis la fin de la guerre froide, le débat sur les crises de politique étrangère est au point mort. Cet article cherche à actualiser la littérature d'analyse de politique étrangère portant sur les crises de politique étrangère. Il utilise une approche déductive pour identifier les lacunes de la littérature actuelle sur les crises de politique étrangère et démontrer leur pertinence pour un cas réel de crise de politique étrangère, à savoir, celui de la *flotille Mavi Marmara*. Cette dernière est identifiée en tant qu'étude du cas « le moins probable » représentatif d'un ensemble plus large de ce que nous qualifions de crises de politique étrangère asymétriques. Nous maximisons l'avantage

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déductif qu'englobe cette conception de recherche et nous plaidons pour une approche actualisée de l'analyse de la politique étrangère visant à étudier les crises de politique étrangère qui inclurait l'hybridité des acteurs, la performativité et les réseaux sociaux.

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## Introduction

Foreign policy crises (FPCs), such as those that led to the outbreak of World War I, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the 1979 Iran hostage crisis, are a central feature of world politics, international relations (IR), and foreign policy analysis (FPA). However, since the end of the Cold War, debate on FPCs has stalled. Most recent studies summarize rather than advance the field, leaving the FPA literature on FPCs outdated (Freedman 2014; Brecher 2018; Houghton 2018). This is problematic as the literature lags behind real-world developments, related, especially, to the role of non-state actors (NSA) in FPCs, the possible causes of FPCs, and the media environment.

This article seeks to update the existing FPA literature on FPCs. Specifically, using a deductively driven approach, which “reasons from general claims to particular conclusions” (Jackson 2016, 94). Accordingly, the article identifies the gaps in the current FPC literature and demonstrates their relevance in a real-world case of FPC, namely, the *Mavi Marmara flotilla*. We identify this as a “least likely” case study that illuminates the analytical blind spots in existing frameworks of FPC and illustrates how they might be addressed. These blind spots include ignoring the role of NSAs in FPCs, excluding certain causal drivers of FPCs, e.g., performativity, and overlooking social media as a factor shaping the environment in which FPCs occur. By social media we mean “a form of electronic communication and networking sites that allow users to follow *and* share content (text, pictures, videos, etc.) and ideas within an online community” (Zeitsoff 2017: 1971).

The article is organized as follows. The first section provides working definitions and a critical mapping of the FPA debate on FPC. The second section adopts a deductive approach to reveal analytical blind spots in existing FPC frameworks. The third section introduces the case study, the *Mavi Marmara Flotilla* (hereafter the *flotilla*), and describes the research design. We argue that, given the increasing and acknowledged role of NSAs in world politics, the *flotilla* is not a standalone case; it represents a broader set of what we refer to as asymmetrical FPCs. We expand on this below. The fourth and fifth sections, respectively, examine the events surrounding the *flotilla* and challenge claims that it was a mere foreign policy incident (Migdalovitz 2010; Turkel Commission 2010) or an assault (United Nations Human Rights Council 2010) by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). Rather, we show that the *flotilla* developed into an FPC. In the sixth section, we explore the relevance of these gaps in the FPA literature to a real-world event, the case of the *flotilla*.

### *Foreign Policy Crisis in Foreign Policy Analysis: A Critical Overview of the Debate*

Early FPA studies of FPCs focused on developing a conceptual framework, e.g., the notion of systemic international crisis. This conception, which was influenced by neo-realism, purported that international events could disrupt or create abrupt changes to the equilibrium of the Cold War international system—defined as a “set of actors interacting with one another in established patterns and through designated structures” (Hermann 1972, 10–11). Thus, Brecher defines an international (macro level) crisis as: “1) a change in the type and/or an increase in intensity of disruptive interactions between two or more states, with a heightened probability of war/military hostilities that, in turn, 2) destabilises their relationship and challenges the structure of an international system” (Brecher 1993, 20–21).

However, the systemic international crisis approach is problematic. For instance, it is extremely difficult to establish causality between disruption to an international system and FPC. Also, data collection at the systemic level is challenging. These impediments, which can be seen in FPC research conducted during the bipolar Cold War system, were exacerbated by the rise of the more fluid and unpredictable international post-Cold War system.

Hence, we adopt the different perspective of a decision-making approach, which follows the psychological stimulus-response model adopted by FPA during its behaviorist turn in the 1970s. This approach focuses on the process of decision-making by individuals, either alone or organized in some sort of collective, in response to an FPC. Its proponents argue that decision-makers do not necessarily interpret a given situation objectively. Rather, it is the decision-makers' perception or subjective grasp of a situation that matters for defining and managing a situation as an FPC (Hermann 1972, 12–13; Jervis 1976, 20; Brecher 2018, 6).

Having conceptualized FPC, the debate differentiates analytically between FPCs and other foreign policy interactions. One such distinction is that international crises and FPCs pose a threat to high priority goals or high priority values. High priority goals refer to state goals, regardless of the government in power; they include the "survival of the state and its population, [and] the avoidance of grave damage through war." High priority values derive from the ideological or material interests defined by decision-makers in a specific crisis, and/or decision-makers' concerns over their reputations and ability to remain in power (Lebow 1980, 10; Brecher, Wilkenfeld, and Moser 1988, 3; Stern 2003b, 187). A second characteristic is that time is finite; the period available for taking decisions before the situation becomes irreversible is limited (Lebow 1980). A third attribute is that, before the threat is overcome, an FPC entails a probability of military hostilities that is qualitatively higher than the norm. As Andersen-Roberts (2015, 201) explains, for a state to experience an FPC, what matters is not whether the normal expectation of war is high or low, but whether the probability of military engagement has become greater. In this context, scholars agree that crisis may involve conflict, but is always "short of war" (Snyder and Diesing 1977, 6–7; Brecher 1993).

While debate converged around these components, it diverged over the element of "surprise" (Hermann 1972, 215–59; Holsti 1972, 20; 10; Lebow 1980, 11; Rosenthal, Charles, and 't Hart 1989, 10). Increasingly, this component came to be seen as not integral to FPCs. Thus, we exclude it from our definition and adopt Brecher's (2018) definition of an FPC as deriving from three interrelated perceptions of the state's decision-makers: (1) a threat to one or more basic values/core interests; (2) finite time for a response; and (3) heightened probability of military hostilities before the threat is overcome (see also, Hermann 1972).

Equipped with the international and decision-making approaches and conceptions of FPC, scholars interested in averting a nuclear catastrophe during the Cold War shifted the lens to crisis management. They were keen to examine why some FPCs stopped short of war while others ended in inadvertent wars. Thus, Graham Allison proposed the notion of bureaucratic politics to explain the (mis)management of FPCs, while George and others focused on specific factors determining crisis management: the role of intelligence, bargaining codes, rules of engagement, psychological and cognitive elements, and crisis-induced stress (Allison 1971; George 1991). Meanwhile, Richard Ned Lebow (1980, 23, 270–71) probed how different types of crises are linked to the tactics adopted to manage them under stress. He categorizes FPCs into justification of hostility, spinoff, brinkmanship, and accident, and, interestingly, finds no correlation between high levels of stress and effective crisis management.

Andersen-Roberts (2015), in a rare departure from the FPC literature's state-centric focus, argues that the outcome of FPCs depends on the techniques available to decision-makers: negotiation, mediation, non-violent military pressure, military

acts, and violence. He maintains that in FPCs involving state and NSAs, states are more likely to employ violence than negotiations or diplomacy due to domestic audience costs and informational and commitment problems generated by engagement with NSAs.

The “crisis management” literature was complemented by work on “crisis forecasting” (Wilkenfeld 1977, 3), chiefly Brecher’s International Crisis Behaviour Project (ICBP), which gathered data on “all states in the global system “from the end of World War I to 2015” to create ‘a more tranquil world’ (Brecher 2018, 1–3). Crucially, the ICBP foregrounded the pluralist methodological approach to the study of international and FPC, which ranged from single case study methodologies to analyses of aggregate data over extended blocks of time and space. It produced datasets allowing research at the international (macro) and unit/actor levels of analysis, using qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Brecher 2018, 4–5, 10, 993, xii).

### *Deductively Unearthing Analytical Blind Spots in Existing FPC Frameworks*

Using a deductive approach, this section identifies gaps in existing FPA literature on FPCs. The first blind spot concerns the actors participating in FPCs. IR and FPA have a longstanding preoccupation with NSA (Josselin and Wallace 2001; Lee 2004; Stoddard 2006; Baumann and Stengel 2014; Haynes 2014). However, the FPA literature on FPCs focuses almost exclusively on interstate FPCs. As argued by David Houghton and others, “it is fair to say that the state-centric view still predominates within the [FPC] literature,” which assumes that FPCs are handled by states (Stern 2003; Houghton 2018). Indeed, in the extensive FPC literature, we found only four articles that discuss NSA, which are portrayed as playing secondary roles as “initiators,” “triggers,” “issue catalysts,” or “escalating participants” of interstate FPCs (Brecher and Wilkenfeld 1997, 779; Ben-Yehuda and Mishali-Ram 2006a,b). Strikingly, the possibility that a NSA is a player in its own right in FPC is overlooked by FPA (Jackson 2016). Therefore, we call for the debate to be broadened to include an FPC involving a direct clash between a state and an NSA, creating what we term an actor-hybrid FPC.

The idea of actor hybridity is not unique to FPC. It has been linked to germane types of conflict, such as grey zone conflicts, and irregular and hybrid wars. Given this overlap, we distinguish analytically between FPC and these types of conflicts and explore potential intersections and differences between the respective debates. By grey zone conflicts, we mean the operational space between peace and war, involving coercive actions to change the status quo often by blurring the line between military and non-military actions and the attribution of events. Typically, grey zone conflicts involve violence below a threshold that, in most cases, would prompt a conventional military response (Morris 2019, 8). By hybrid war, we mean ‘a conflict involving a combination of conventional military forces and irregulars (guerrillas, insurgents, and terrorists), which could include both state and NSA, aimed at achieving a common political purpose’ (Williamson and Mansoor 2012, 3). This type of conflict is similar to an irregular war, defined as ‘a violent struggle among state and NSA for legitimacy and influence of the relevant populations’ (Hoffman 2016).

Drawing on these definitions, it is helpful to explore how our earlier examination of the conceptions of FPC, debate on grey zones, irregular and hybrid wars, feed into each other. Grey zone conflicts and hybrid and irregular wars are similar to actor-hybrid FPCs in that they exhibit mixed-actor conflicts that pit states against NSAs. In addition, in these types of conflicts, the level of violence remains below the threshold of war (Wirtz 2017, 1). At the same time, these mixed-actor conflicts are distinctive. First, NSAs participating in FPCs pose an immediate and direct threat to the core interests and basic values of a state. Conversely, NSAs in grey zone conflicts and irregular and hybrid wars typically stop short of threatening their opponents’

core interests and basic values, to avoid a decisive response or because their tools are severely constrained. Instead, they seek to alter the status quo by eroding the adversary's power and will (Mazar 2015). Second, the end point of a grey zone conflict or an irregular or hybrid war is usually unclear, whereas actor-hybrid FPCs are finite. Third, attribution is often a problem in these types of conflicts. The campaigns involve certain actions in which participants, to a degree, deliberately disguise their role. Thus, states and NSAs will use cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and proxy forces, which leave room for deniability. Contrawise, in actor-hybrid FPCs, actions are visible and explicit. Hence, while there are some overlaps between actor-hybrid FPCs, grey zone conflicts, and regular and hybrid wars, actor-hybrid FPCs, where a state and an NSA clash, are clearly distinguishable.

The second blind spot refers to consideration of the causal drivers of FPC. Daniel Wajner argues convincingly that “most international relations scholars analyse international disputes using a ‘chess logic’” [whereby] “the actors seek to outmanoeuvre their opponents on the battleground” (Wajner 2019b, 1035). Furthermore, he usefully distinguishes chess logic conflicts from an “increasing number of clashes [that] are guided by a ‘performance logic’: although the players interact with one another, their real targets are audiences” (Wajner 2019b, 1035). We draw on and expand Wajner's useful contrast to advance the debate on FPCs.

While we recognize the importance of the chess logic for explaining interstate FPCs, applying this logic to actor-hybrid FPC is problematic. The chess logic, which draws on the realist assumption that state action is driven by rationally derived interests, presumes an actor unity that seldom applies to NSAs. Therefore, the reductionist, state-centric chess logic approach to explaining FPC, and the related problems it creates, calls for an expanded debate on the causality proposed in the FPA literature on FPC, through the introduction of the notion of performativity. Anna Leander usefully initiated the “performative turn” with her call to begin “staging IR” and her use of the metaphors of “stages,” “casts,” “pros,” “scripts,” and “production costs” to theorize IR (Leander 2011; see also Wajner 2019b; Braun, Schindler, and Wille 2019). Leander's research and Wajner's work triggered a stimulating debate about how “performative acts,” operating in the space between “actors” and “audiences,” affect legitimacy, which Wajner (2019b, 2) defines as “the combined perception of support that members of the international community bestow upon other members.”

Drawing on Leander's and Wajner's works, by performativity logic we mean a situation where two actors interact directly with each other, although the real targets are global and regional audiences. Correspondingly, success or failure relies on audiences' approval or disapproval of international audiences (Wajner 2019b, 2), which have increased their influence due to globalization. As Neumann (2015) explains, globalization entailed the proliferation of sources of information, which intensifies the public struggle involving international audiences over defining reality. Reflecting this trend, the foreign policy literature recognizes the significance of performativity for shaping diplomacy, strategic communications and military practices, and decision-making (Mattern 2005; More 2006; Shimazo 2014). Drawing on the successful application of performativity to other debates in IR, we call to incorporate this conception into the debate on FPC, which the FPA literature on FPC has hitherto not done. Specifically, in terms of causality, performativity drives NSAs to challenge states, which may result in a threat to core interest and high priority values, thereby triggering the conditions leading to the FPC. Performativity also influences how FPC unfolds. We return to both points later.

The third blind spot relates to the role played by the media in shaping the environment in which FPC occurs. The part played by traditional and social media in world affairs has been the focus of much research in IR and FPA (see Herman and Chomsky 1988; Schedufle 2000; Robinson 2011; Katz 2017; Miler, Robinson and Bakir 2017; Aran and Fleischmann 2019; see also, Sheaffer and Shenhav 2009;

Treisman 2016; Zeitzoff 2017; Benmelech and Klor 2018). Indeed, FPA has for long been interested in several issues related to traditional media—from its influence on diplomacy and foreign policy formulation related to humanitarian crises, to how framing techniques are deployed in foreign policymaking and government propaganda, to the impact of public opinion and the capacity of foreign policy elites to “manufacture consent” (Herman and Chomsky 1998; Robinson 2011; Katz 2017; Miler, Robinson and Bakir 2017; Aran and Fleischmann 2019). More recently, FPA and IR scholars have focused on the influence of the entertainment industry and social media platforms on various aspects of foreign policy. These include, among others, use of social media by terrorist groups, deployment of social media by regimes to disseminate misinformation and carry out cyberattacks and use of social media in public diplomacy and citizen reporting (Sheafer and Shenhav 2009; Allan 2010; Treisman 2016; Zeitzoff 2017; Benmelech and Klor 2018).

These studies are linked to a broader debate over whether the rise of social media has created a “new” media environment. Enthusiasts argue that the current hybrid media environment, including mainstream media, alternative media, social media, and global media, connected via the Internet, have produced a fundamental transformation. New media provide novel opportunities for reporting and flow of information between elites and non-elites, foreign policy officials and publics, across global, international, and national settings. From this perspective, NSA networks can constrain state power via their current greater ability to report and generate images globally (Gilboa et al. 2016; Robinson 2017). The skeptics contend, conversely, that traditional media still dominate and that the political economy of new media differs little from the past; major corporations still dominate the landscape (Baum and Potter 2010; Robinson 2015). Consequently, it is very difficult to find examples of media either constraining foreign policy or instigating substantive foreign policy that was not already on decision-makers’ agendas (Robinson 2017). This stimulating debate has a direct bearing on the environment in which FPCs take place. For instance, does the contemporary hybrid media environment constrain the foreign policy of states during FPCs, and how? What tactics do states and NSAs use in the new media environment and how do they adapt to it? Expanding the debate on FPC to include the social media component would help to address such fundamental yet overlooked questions. Having identified three key blind spots in the existing FPA literature on FPCs, we now offer a case study analysis to demonstrate how these blind spots can be addressed and how their study constitutes an updating of the debate on FPC.

### *Introducing the Case Study*

The case study selected to illustrate the aforementioned blind spots is the *Mavi Marmara flotilla*. It commenced when six vessels were boarded 130 km from the Israeli coast with the declared intention of delivering aid to the Gaza Strip and breaching the Israeli and Egyptian naval blockade on the territory. On May 31, 2010, the vessels were intercepted 72 nautical miles from the Gaza Strip, as IDF Commandoes landed on the largest ship, the *Mavi Marmara*. Violent clashes ensued, resulting in nine Turkish nationals killed and a further 55 passengers and 10 IDF soldiers injured. The ships were subsequently brought to the Israeli port of Ashdod where activists were arrested and interrogated until their release and deportation the next day (BBC 2011).

The rationale for selecting this case study, which is analyzed in more detail below, is as follows. First, as Bennet and George have demonstrated, case studies offer powerful advantages by providing testable implications based on examining causal mechanisms—*independent stable factors* that, under certain conditions, link causes to effects (George and Bennet 2005; Levy 2008). We use three indicators to represent the *flotilla* as a broad set of what we term asymmetrical FPCs. The first



indicator concerns the asymmetry of the actors, i.e., state versus NSAs; the second relates to the asymmetry of the material capabilities at the disposal of the actors involved in the *flotilla* FPC; the third is tied to the decision-making structures, which are legally defined and are binding in the case of a state actor and are informal in the case of an NSA. As we shall see, these three aspects of asymmetry—actorness, material capabilities, and decision-making structure—which would underpin any interaction between a state and an NSA in an FPC, played out in significant and sometimes unexpected ways in our case.

The second consideration relates to foregrounding our argument that FPA should expand its state-centric focus by including FPC pitting states against NSAs. In this context, we identified the *flotilla* as a least-likely case study, which, as Levy (2008) and Bennet and Elman (2007) demonstrated, is a very useful methodological device for “maximising inferential leverage.” When considering why the *flotilla* falls into the category of a least-likely case study, we would draw attention to a possible prospective barely armed ad-hoc coalition of NSAs—comprising the Free Gaza Movement, the European Campaign to End the Siege and *Insani Yardım Vakfı*, a Turkish-based Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH)—to act, in and of itself, in an FPC. A priori, consideration of this coalition as threatening the core interests and basic values—a prerequisite for acting on its own in the FPC—of a nuclear regional power, Israel, was unlikely. However, this is precisely what occurred in the *flotilla* case and was what prompted Israeli policymakers to take a decision within a finite timeframe and heightened the probability of war/military hostilities, prompting a full blown asymmetrical FPC.

The third reason was the timing of the *flotilla* asymmetrical FPC. The year 2010 was acknowledged by leading media studies to be a watershed, marking maturation of the social media environment and its related interlinks to performativity (Newman 2009; Steinitz and Zarin 2012). Thus, drawing on Bennet and Elman (2007), the timing of the *flotilla* FPC seems particularly relevant; it enables FPA scholars to conduct both overtime and beforetime case study comparisons, geared toward identifying the evolving influence of social media and its interlinks with performativity, on the foreign policy environment in which FPCs take place. The provision of this analytical-historical reference point for scholars wishing to trace the influence of performativity and social media in the context of FPCs would have been impossible had we chosen a case study that occurred when the social media environment was in a more advanced stage (i.e., post-2010) or before it fully matured (pre-2010).

Our approach to data collection is informed by the case study methodology literature, which stresses the need for primary sources to identify excluded variables, causal mechanisms, and units of analysis (George and Bennet 2005, 176). Our data come from several sources, including media reports and official reports produced by Israel, Turkey, the United Nations, and the US Congress, written by committees appointed to investigate the events surrounding the 2010 *flotilla* to Gaza. Given that the testimonies offered to enquiry commissions, especially public ones, cannot be taken at face value, we triangulated the information gleaned from these testimonies with information from other primary sources and semi-structured interviews conducted with key players in the events. These data sets are analyzed through the three lenses identified in the deductively driven review of the literature.

We are conscious that our analysis focuses on Israel and its foreign policymakers. This was a deliberate choice because our interest in this article is accounting for the influence of actor hybridity, performativity, and social media on an asymmetrical FPC, from the perspective of a state. We acknowledge the importance of analyzing these issues from an NSA perspective, but such analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we hope that it will spur future research in this direction.

*The Mavi Marmara Flotilla—background and Key Events*

In September 2005, Israel withdrew from the Gaza strip, but retained control over its air space, territorial waters, and the land crossings connecting it to Israel. In February 2006, the Palestinian Islamic resistance movement, Hamas, won the Palestinian Authority (PA) legislative elections after a landslide defeat of its main rival, Fatah (Migdalovitz 2010; Turkel Commission 2010). As Hamas formed its government, the Quartet—comprising the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations—conditioned the supply of foreign aid to Hamas on committing to “nonviolence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations” (United Nations 2006). Hamas rejected those demands, prompting Israel, the United States, and the European Union to deny any links to its government and to retain its designation as a terrorist organization (United States Department of State 2008; Dearden 2017).

Meanwhile, relations between Hamas and Fatah deteriorated and, in June 2007, collapsed when Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip by force, in what it deemed a preemptive act to prevent Fatah from striking first. The takeover prompted PA President and leader of Fatah, Mahmoud Abbas, to dissolve the Hamas-led government, precipitating a split within the Palestinian National Movement. The Fatah-led PA, established in the 1995 Oslo II agreement, retained political and military jurisdiction over approximately 18 percent of the West Bank, defined as areas A. In addition, the PA shared with Israel, jurisdiction over Areas B, comprising approximately 22 percent of the West Bank (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1995). Meanwhile, Hamas established full and effective control over the Gaza Strip, while Israel maintained exclusive control over 60 percent of the West Bank, branded Areas C.

Israel’s response to Hamas’s takeover was swift. On September 19, 2007, it defined the Gaza Strip as “hostile territory,” which, as the then Minister of Defense explained, “is equivalent in every way to ‘a state of war’ with a hostile state” (Barak 2010). Accordingly, Israel imposed extremely tight restrictions on the movement of people and goods to and from the Gaza Strip via air, land, and sea, in coordination with Egypt. Simultaneously, Israel deployed extensive military force and imposed diplomatic and economic sanctions on Hamas, which responded by firing rockets and mortars into Israel, engaging militarily with the IDF and constructing a system of underground tunnels to smuggle goods from Egypt into the Gaza Strip. An exhaustive evaluation of Israel’s and Hamas’s policies is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say that there was charged debate over whether Israeli policies created a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, whether Israel and Hamas were acting in self-defense, and whether they were in compliance with international human and humanitarian law (see Esposito 2006; Palmer 2011, 14–16, 4; Turkel Commission 2010, 29, 55–60, 65–71).

Israel’s policies prompted attempts by international organizations to breach what they defined as a closure or even a siege of the Gaza Strip. Thus, between August and December 2008, a total of five ships departed from various Mediterranean ports to provide humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip. Israel had little alternative but to grant these ships entry. Since there was no intelligence that the ships carried weapons, they were rendered “neutral” in international law terms. Consequently, Israel had no legal right to “visit and search” these small vessels—let alone seize them forcibly. Also, the government hoped that granting them entry to the Gaza Strip would render these efforts to deliver aid “non-events” and reduce the motivation for organizing further attempts (Turkel Commission 2010, 34).<sup>1</sup>

As the Israel–Hamas conflict intensified, Israel tightened its restrictions on the Gaza Strip. Crucially, on January 3, 2009, in the midst of Operation Cast Lead, the most serious military conflagration since the 2007 Hamas takeover, Israel took a critical decision. It imposed a naval “blockade,” 20 nautical miles from the Gaza Strip,

<sup>1</sup>Interview with Mr Ehud Olmert, November 14, 2014, Tel Aviv.

closing it “to all maritime traffic,” which replaced the previous rendition of the sea area surrounding the Gaza Strip as a “closed maritime zone” (Netanyahu 2010). This decision, which remains in place to this day, was based on legal advice from the IDF attorney general. He maintained that imposing a blockade, rather than a closed maritime zone, was the only way of aligning to international law, the policy Israel initiated during Operation Cast Lead of barring civilian aid convoys from entering the Gaza Strip by sea (Barak 2010; Netanyahu 2010; Turkel Commission 2010).

According to the United Nations, the naval blockade “was imposed as a legitimate security measure in order to prevent weapons from entering Gaza by sea” and its implementation “complied with international law” (Palmer 2011, 4). However, this strictly legalistic analysis of the blockade is reductionist. It overlooks the evidence that the blockade was also part of a three-pronged policy Israel employed against Hamas. First, Israel sought to prevent Hamas receiving weapons via sea-going vessels, which could carry larger and more lethal quantities of weapons than any other means of transportation available to Hamas. Second, Israel hoped to turn Gazans against Hamas by contrasting the lives of Palestinians in the West Bank to the harsher conditions in the Gaza Strip under Hamas rule. Third, Israel wanted to weaken Hamas economically and to isolate it internationally (Turkel Commission 2010, 52, 63, 80; Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2011 and see footnote 2 above).

Among the fiercest critics of Israel’s policy was Turkey, which, following Hamas’s election victory in 2006, invited a high-level Hamas delegation for an official visit, recognizing it as the “the legitimate government of the Palestinian people” (Gagaptay 2009). Israel’s and Turkey’s contrasting positions toward Hamas seriously strained relations, which, in 2010, reached their lowest point since the rapprochement in the mid-1990s (Saltzman 2015, 257).

In January 2010, amid increasingly tense Israeli–Turkish relations, a sixth attempt to breach Israel’s blockade over the Gaza Strip was launched by a global network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It was led by the Free Gaza Movement, the European Campaign to End the Siege, and a Turkish-based Humanitarian Relief Foundation, the IHH.<sup>2</sup> In mid-May 2010, this NSA coalition launched a *flotilla*, manned by some 700 activists from 38 countries. It was the largest aid convoy to date in terms of numbers of passengers and amount of cargo carried. The declared aims of the activists participating in the “Gaza Freedom Flotilla,” 600 of whom were on one vessel, *The Mavi Marmara*, was to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza’s population and break the naval blockade imposed by Israel. The activists repeatedly stated their intention to create a “media event” to focus the world’s attention on the blockade by resisting any attempt by Israel to forcefully take over the ships (Turkel Commission 2010, 2,168; Government of Israel 2012, 98,101–102; Wajner 2019b). Crucially, the group of NSAs acted independently and, as President Erdogan of Turkey would later confirm, was never backed by Turkey (Ravid 2016, Daily Sabah 2016). At the same time, Turkey did not prevent the coalition NSA from setting sail from its ports. Therefore, the role of Turkey during this stage was one of an enabler rather than an active participant and the ground was set for a direct clash between a group of NSAs and Israel.

### *The Flotilla as an FPC*

Ostensibly, the prospects that the *flotilla* could pose a threat to Israel’s core interests or high-priority values were extremely poor. The *flotilla*’s capabilities were no match for those of the state of Israel—a regional nuclear power and a developed economy with a highly sophisticated diplomatic, military, and technological global presence. Indeed, the then Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs, Avigdor Lieberman, claimed

<sup>2</sup>See the Free Gaza Movement official website, <https://www.freegaza.org/>, accessed September 23, 2019.

that he rejected the idea that the *flotilla* constituted an FPC.<sup>3</sup> However, Lieberman was in the minority in the leading decision-making troika.

Prime Minister Netanyahu, who “unlike during previous *flotillas* was *very involved from the outset* in preparing the response to the *Mavi Marmara*,” argued that Israel’s reaction “derived” from its policy toward Hamas (Government of Israel 2012, 69). Tellingly, Netanyahu described Hamas as “a terrorist organization that calls and takes actions to destroy Israel” and “is supported by Iran, who also calls to remove Israel from the map.” Moreover, the prime minister argued that “Hamas has transformed the Gaza Strip into a terrorist enclave . . . a giant weapon garrison and a base for launching attacks against Israel” (see footnote 2).

Netanyahu’s threat perception stemmed from his enduring beliefs rather than any argument he had developed for the purposes of his testimony before the enquiry committee. Back in 2005, Netanyahu had resigned from his post as Minister of Finance in Ariel Sharon’s government in protest at the unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. In his letter of resignation, Netanyahu wrote: “I am not prepared to be a partner to a move that ignores reality and proceeds blindly toward turning the Gaza Strip into a base for Islamic terrorism which will threaten the state” (Urquhart 2005).

Netanyahu’s deep-seated views were highly significant. As the Israeli comptroller revealed, Netanyahu was at the pinnacle of the Israeli decision-making process and was the only decision-maker in a position to receive and integrate the information generated by all the relevant state agencies during the *flotilla* (Government of Israel 2012, 69). In directly linking the *flotilla* and the threats posed by Hamas and Iran, the prime minister equated the threat posed by the *flotilla* to a threat to Israel’s core security interests.

The other most influential decision-maker, alongside the Prime Minister, was Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who was tasked with supervising and coordinating the military and civil-service response to the *flotilla* (see footnote 3).<sup>4</sup> Barak maintained that “until the security situation changes fundamentally, the naval blockade is required by virtue of our responsibility for the security of the citizens of the state of Israel and cannot be lifted . . . it derives from the right and duty Israel has to protect its citizens” (see footnote 3).<sup>5</sup> Specifically, Barak told the Turkel Committee that halting the *flotilla* and upholding the naval blockade was critical for dealing with the threats posed to Israel’s core interests, including “the proliferation of nuclear military technology” and terror attacks against Israel’s gas rigs in the Mediterranean Sea (Ehud Barak Testimony before the Turkel Commission).<sup>6</sup> This threat perception was consistent with Barak’s decision, taken as defense minister more than a year before the *flotilla* FPC, to impose the maritime blockade on the Gaza Strip.

Moreover, Barak subsequently opined that the *flotilla* posed a threat to a high-priority value, namely, the ability of a sovereign state to take and enforce decisions. As he explained, “irrespective of whether the naval blockade was a correct policy or not, the decision of whether to retain it has to be a decision made by Israel, as a sovereign state, and not the result of an external force violently compelling Israel to change its policy.”<sup>7</sup> He went on to say that the *flotilla* was an attempt to challenge Israel’s ability to exert its sovereignty and determine its own interest—“an attempt that could not be allowed to succeed.”<sup>8</sup>

How the *flotilla* was perceived by Israel’s most influential decision-makers was decisive for defining the situation since it was not subjected to serious scrutiny.

<sup>3</sup>Interview with Mr Avigdor Lieberman, February 10, 2016, Tel-Aviv.

<sup>4</sup>Interview with Mr Ehud Barak, November 15, 2017, Tel Aviv.

<sup>5</sup>Interview with Mr Ehud Barak, November 15, 2017, Tel Aviv.

<sup>6</sup>Ehud Barak testimony before the Turkel Commission; Interview with former Head of the Israeli Navy, Mr Eliezer Marom, January 19, 2016, Tel Aviv.

<sup>7</sup>Interview with Barak.

<sup>8</sup>Interview with Barak.

The Forum of the Seven—an ad-hoc security-political cabinet appointed by Prime Minister Netanyahu during his 2009–2013 term to deal with key national security matters—was convened to discuss the *flotilla* for the first time, on May 26, 2010, after the *flotilla* had set sail (Government of Israel 2012, 69). In addition to Prime Minister Netanyahu, Defense Minister Barak and Foreign Minister Lieberman, the Forum included the Minister for Strategic Affairs, Moshe Ya'alon, Minister of Intelligence and Atomic Energy, Dan Meridor, Finance Minister, Yuval Steinitz, and the Minister without Portfolio, Ze'ev Benny Begin. It accepted the severity of the threat ascribed by the prime minister and his defense minister and decided, unanimously, to retain the naval blockade to bar the *flotilla* from reaching the Gaza Strip (Barak 2010; Turkel Commission 2010, 103).

The Forum of the Seven's common decision crystallized two of the three conditions defining an FPC. The Israeli decision-making unit linked the approaching *flotilla* to a broader set of threats posed by Hamas—and indirectly Iran—to Israeli core interests and high-priority values. This may well have been an inflated threat perception. Notwithstanding, as is common in FPC, the situation was defined by the psychological environment rather than by the decision-makers' "operational environment" (see Sprout and Sprout 1956).

Linking the *flotilla* to a threat to Israel's core interests and high-priority values unleashed the specific time elements defining an FPC; the government would have to decide whether to halt the *flotilla* forcibly before it breached the blockade. To avoid use of force, Israel appealed to several states to halt the *flotilla*, but was rebuffed (Netanyahu 2010; Turkel Commission 2010, 103–5; Government of Israel 2012, 69). Thus, the decision-makers concluded that Israel had no other foreign policy means to deploy vis-à-vis the *flotilla* and could not enter into direct negotiations, so they reverted to seizure by force. A detailed military operations plan was prepared by the IDF, code named "Sky Winds 7," which stated that "the IDF will prevent unauthorized sea vessels to reach the Gaza Strip . . . whilst keeping the lowest possible media profile" (Turkel Commission 2010, 109). The IDF's Sea Commando 13 and auxiliary combat units were charged with executing the operation, which was presided over by the then Head of the Israeli Navy, Vice Admiral Eliezer Marom (Turkel Commission 2010, 110).

The stakes were high at this point—especially considering intelligence reports that the IHH intended to resist forceful takeover of the ships and the IHH's past record. In January 2010, in an attempt to breach the Rafah crossing into Gaza from Egypt, the IHH had clashed with Egyptian security forces leaving 12 Egyptian policemen wounded and 1 dead. Thus, the key Israeli decision-makers concluded that a violent clash was inevitable (Barak 2010; Champion 2010; Turkel Commission 2010, 162–63; Government of Israel 2012, 68). Indeed, Vice Admiral Marom sent letters to his Turkish, Italian, and Greek counterparts, warning that he expected that the effort to stop the *flotilla* would become violent and asking them to try to halt it.<sup>9</sup> Amid the looming combustible encounter on the high seas, the third defining element of an FPC, a heightened probability of military hostilities, materialized.

The forceful takeover of the *Mavi Marmara* commenced at 04:26 on May 31, 72 nautical miles from land. The Israeli Navy initially issued five warnings to the *flotilla* that it was approaching the naval-blockaded Gaza Strip and ordered it to change course. These orders were ignored. Subsequently, as the IDF's Sea Commando unit 13 attempted to seize the vessels, IHH activists mounted a violent resistance, using axes, knives, metal rods, and some live ammunition. During these violent clashes, three Israeli navy commandos were captured; they suffered life-threatening injuries and were held captive on the lower deck of the *Mavi Marmara* for around 40 minutes, prompting the IDF's Sea Commando 13 unit to seize the *Mavi Marmara*, using lethal force (Palmer 2011, 4). By the end of the forceful takeover, the casualty toll

<sup>9</sup>Interview with Marom.

was high. Nine IDF soldiers had been wounded, one near fatally; 55 campaigners (all but one Turkish nationals) had been wounded, 20 very severely; and another 9 Turkish nationals had been killed (Turkel Commission 2010, 158; Palmer 2011, 3–4; Government of Israel 2012, 116). Live footage from the *Mavi Marmara*, which Israel failed to block, was disseminated by activists who had established a “media centre” on the vessel (Palmer 2011, 4; Turkel Commission 2010, 115–16).

The forceful seizure of the *Mavi Marmara* and the ensuing footage almost triggered an interstate FPC between Israel and Turkey. On June 1, the then US Secretary of State recalled that Turkey’s “Foreign Minister Davutoglu came to see me, and we talked for more than two hours. He was highly emotional and threatened that Turkey might declare war on Israel” (Clinton 2014, 321–22). However, US mediation and the concerted efforts of the Israeli and Turkish navies to avoid an inadvertent clash prevented the *flotilla* FPC from igniting an interstate FPC between Israel and Turkey (Clinton 2014).<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the *flotilla* crisis precipitated the worst downturn in diplomatic relations between Turkey and Israel since the end of the Cold War; this was resolved only in 2016 after Israel agreed to apologize officially to Turkey and pay compensation to the victims’ families (Sever and Almog 2019).

#### *The Flotilla: Illustrating Analytical Blind Spots in the FPA Literature on FPC*

In some respects, the *flotilla* corresponded to how the current FPA literature portrays FPC. It emerged around a single issue, the naval blockade of the Gaza Strip. The time for taking decisions before the situation became irreversible was finite. Until the threat was overcome, there was a heightened probability of military hostilities. At the same time, the *flotilla* FPC differed significantly from how FPA has portrayed FPCs and in ways that illustrate that the gaps we identified in the FPA literature are relevant for a real-world FPC. Furthermore, as the above survey of events demonstrates, the *flotilla* emerges as a least-likely case. Thus, if the gaps in the literature we identified deductively emerge as significant in this case, then, by virtue of being a least-likely case study, they are likely to appear significant in a similar set of state-NSA FPCs, warranting updating of the debate along the following lines.

#### **Actor Hybridity**

The assumption in the FPA literature that NSAs are mere initiators, triggers, catalysts, and escalating participants in interstate FPCs is refuted by the *flotilla* FPC. Indeed, the key Israeli decision-makers perceived the actions and intentions of the NSA coalition comprising the *flotilla* as posing a dual threat. A breach of the blockade was seen as a clear threat to Israel’s core security interests of stopping the transfer of larger quantities of more lethal weapons to Hamas and constraining its ability to defend its gas rigs in the Mediterranean. Additionally, a breach of the blockade by the *flotilla* was viewed as a direct threat to the high-priority value of the right of a sovereign state to take its own decisions—in this case whether or not to uphold the blockade. Thus, and in contrast to what the FPC literature argues, NSAs do not just play a secondary role in interstate FPCs. Rather, by virtue of the threats they may pose to states’ core interests and high-priority values, NSAs may be direct participants in FPCs exhibiting actor hybridity. Moreover, in the *flotilla* FPC, the NSA interacted with the state in fundamentally different ways from their interactions in grey zone conflicts and hybrid and irregular wars that do not threaten core interests or high priority values deliberately.

The actor-hybrid *flotilla* FPC underscored the asymmetric material capabilities, which favored Israel. However, certain of the foreign policy tools that Israel might have used were this interstate FPC, a grey zone conflict, hybrid or irregular war, such as coercive diplomacy, deterrence, and containment, were impracticable for

<sup>10</sup>Interview with Marom.

an NSA in the asymmetrical *flotilla* FPC. Israel's response to the *flotilla* was restricted to unsuccessful diplomatic pleas to other states to halt the *flotilla*, which left use of force as the only viable means of stopping the *flotilla*. This underlined the limited foreign policy tool kit available to Israel to deal with an asymmetrical FPC.

### Performativity

The *flotilla* actor-hybrid FPC differs from interstate FPCs not just in terms of the actors involved. It has implications, also, for how FPA explains FPCs. The aforementioned chess and bureaucratic politics logics seem inapplicable to the actor-hybrid FPC examined here. For instance, the chess logic is based on the assumption that the conditions of rationality govern foreign policy interaction in an FPC; however, this did not apply to the actor-hybrid *flotilla* FPC case. The coalition of NSAs was not a unitary actor—a prerequisite for acting rationally—while perceptions seriously compromised Israel's ability to pursue a rational foreign policy. The bureaucratic politics model is also not relevant in terms of understanding how the FPC was managed. The *flotilla* FPC did not exhibit such logic due to the Israeli prime minister's and the defense minister's firm control over the decision-making process and the dominance of the IDF during the implementation phase. In addition, the coalition of NSAs did not possess the organizational apparatus required for the emergence of a bureaucratic politics dynamics.

Thus, our call to update the FPA literature on FPC is based on the inclusion of a performativity logic—overlooked by the FPA literature on FPC—which was played out in the actor-hybrid *flotilla* FPC. Driven by performativity, as mentioned earlier in relation to Wajner's work, two actors interacted directly with each other, but their real targets included global and regional audiences. Success or failure of their interactions was dependent on these audiences' approval or disapproval. Correspondingly, we show that the activists on the *Mavi Marmara* stated repeatedly that their aim was to create a media event by resisting any Israeli force, a claim borne out by the establishment of a sophisticated “media center” on the vessel which provided the “stage” and “script” required for performativity. Similarly, the decisions and measures taken by the Israeli policymakers were also shaped, significantly by the performativity logic. An article in the IDF's academic journal, *Ma'arachot*, on the lessons from the *flotilla* FPC, penned by the IDF's spokesman during the crisis, Brigadier Avi Bnayahu (2012), is illuminating:

A photo or a short video incorporated in a blog, in social networks like YouTube and Facebook, or even a Tweet, are gradually replacing the role once played by the IDF's spokesman's announcements, press conferences, and other traditional media tools we once used . . . it means that authorities find it increasingly difficult to control information . . . which has immediate impact on public opinion in Israel and abroad, on governments and policy-makers in Israel and its enemies, and in by-standing states—state that are not involved directly in a conflict but follow it closely.

Yarden Vatika'i, the then head of the Israeli public diplomacy division, established a further link between the logic of performativity and the decisions taken by Israel, especially regarding the design and timing of Operation Sky Winds 7. Specifically, concerns over the airing of live footage of the clash between the IDF forces and campaigners played a decisive role in determining the timing and location of the forceful takeover. As Vatika'i explained, “the strategy was to keep the event under the wraps, work far away when it was dark, and ensure that the forceful takeover

remains outside the news cycle.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, awareness that the interaction with the group of NSAs entailed a performative dynamic played a decisive role in the controversial decision to carry out the forceful takeover in the hours of darkness and in international waters, rather than in daylight conditions and in Israeli territorial waters.

The performativity logic also significantly shaped military-tactical considerations as Israeli decision-makers contemplated different ways to halt the *flotilla*. One suggestion was to disable the engines of the whole *flotilla* before it reached the blockaded area. The then IDF spokesperson, Avi Bnayahu, when asked about the feasibility of such a plan recalled that:

“Stopping the ships in the middle of the sea? That had the prospect of a Media ambush as you become responsible for providing the needs of seven hundred citizens under live coverage. Therefore, I was very active in ruling this option out, much to the annoyance of several members of the IDF’s general staff.”<sup>12</sup>

### Social Media

This highlights the need to expand the debate on FPC in FPA to include social media, which palpably influenced what we referred to earlier, drawing on Wajner’s work, as the “battle for legitimacy,” which erupted following the forceful takeover of the *Mavi Marmara* by the IDF. As events unfolded, the ad-hoc coalition of NSAs proved nimbler and more effective than the Israeli authorities in taking the initiative. As key organizers of the *flotilla* declared, every computer, camera, and cell phone became a “weapon,” which was deployed with alacrity to release footage of the IDF’s lethal takeover of the vessel. The use of these means of communication was premeditated and operationalized, first, by the 17 global media representatives on board, who, together with the NSAs, sent material to social media platforms. Turkish TV and Al-Jazeera were privileged with access to the cameras on board the *Mavi Marmara*, allowing both channels to transmit live footage directly to their newsrooms (Wajner 2019a, 8).

In contrast, the key Israeli decision-makers recalled the length of time it took for them to release the footage showing “Israel’s version” of events. Bnayahu and other officials recalled that, because Israel was a state, there were several obstacles to the release of footage to support its narrative. The IDF’s standing operating procedures required that the families of wounded soldiers should be informed prior to the release of any footage of the incident. In addition, Bnayahu recalls that further delays were caused by fierce arguments among the IDF’s general staff about whether or not to release film of the fatal clashes between Sea Commando 13 unit and the IHH activists. While certain officers, such as the commander of the Israeli Air Force, maintained that footage of Israeli soldiers being attacked by activists dented the IDF’s power of deterrence, the IDF’s spokesperson was keen to counter the campaigners’ narrative. Ultimately, and reflecting how significantly the performativity logic and social media impinged upon decisions during the FPC, it was the IDF Chief of Staff’s decision to release the footage.<sup>13</sup>

The influence of social media had an enduring effect. Israeli decision-makers, such as Defense Minister Barak, conceded that the coalition of NSAs had had the upper hand in the battle for legitimacy prompted by the *flotilla* (Wajner 2019a, 8). Academic studies surveying media coverage of the *flotilla* reinforce Barak’s observation. They demonstrate that the *flotilla* FPC was more often described as an attack by Israeli armed forces on defenseless peace activists than the act of self-defense by the IDF which Israel claimed. Likewise, depiction of the FPC by the NSA, Hamas,

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Mr Yarden Vatika’i, Head of Israeli Public Diplomacy Division, October 10, 2019, Tel Aviv; testimony of IDF Chief of Staff, Gabi Ashkenazi, to the Turkel Commission, p. 180.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with former IDF spokesman, Mr Avi Bnayahu, July 27, 2019, Tel-Aviv.

<sup>13</sup> Interviews with Bnayahu, Vatika’i, and Ashkenazi.



and Turkey as a “bloodbath” or a “massacre” gained more traction in the media than Israeli efforts to portray the FPC as the lynching of Israeli soldiers (see [Wajner 2019b](#), 9–11; [Bayram 2010](#); [Fahmy and Britain 2014](#); [Vahid and Abbasian 2014](#)).

In appraising the influence of social media, we should heed [Zeitsoff's \(2017: 1982\)](#) plea not to focus only on whether social media favors governments or activists. Instead, as he argues compellingly, it is more fruitful to focus on the strategic interaction and adaptation of new tactics. In this context, it is worth noting that the *flotilla* FPC prompted major institutional changes within the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the IDF, geared toward improving Israel's ability to cope with hybrid actor FPCs in a foreign policy environment shaped by social media. The MFA set up its own public diplomacy department comprised of five units: Arabic speaking, content production, digital diplomacy, public relations/branding, and civil society affairs. The budget increase for public diplomacy in 2011, in response to the *flotilla* FPC, was significant: from NIS40 million to NIS100 million. Similarly, the IDF Spokesperson Division created a new media desk, which, in the wake of the *flotilla* FPC, became a substantive force in terms of personnel numbers and diversity of foreign languages and channels exploited. By the time of the 2012 and 2014 confrontations with Hamas, Israel had well-established, interactive new media situation rooms ([Greenhouse 2012](#); [Wajner 2019a](#)).

#### *Toward an Updated FPA Debate on FPCs*

This article used a deductive approach to identify gaps in the current FPA literature on FPCs and illustrate their significance in a least-likely case, the *Mavi Marmara flotilla* FPC. We argued that this case represents a range of what we term asymmetrical FPCs, using specific indicators: the unevenness of the actors—a state and a NSA—the material capabilities at the disposal of each of them, and the disparity among decision-making structures. Maximizing the inferential leverage entailed by the research design deployed by this article, we have demonstrated that the FPA debate on FPC could be usefully updated in a number of ways.

First, we advocate a broadening of the remit from the current state-centric focus to include FPCs that pit states against NSAs. We proposed the notion of actor-hybridity to capture the interactions in which NSAs become primary rather than secondary players in FPCs, as portrayed by the stalled FPA literature. Our analysis makes it clear that an NSA can pose a direct threat to core interests and core values. More research is needed to map the potential threats NSAs might pose and how decision-makers might respond.

Our analysis reveals, also, that FPA should not lose sight of normative dimensions. Several of the activists on board the *Mavi Marmara* were willing to take huge risks and to pay with their lives for a cause in which they believed. It follows that FPA should take account of the rights of NSAs to instigate an FPC to protest against and challenge what they deem unethical policies. At the same time, the threats posed by NSAs adopting a normative stance to state security, economic interests, and sovereignty need also be considered as we navigate the complex ethical questions raised by actor-hybrid and asymmetrical FPCs.

A better understanding of the type of threats and normative issues presented by actor-hybridity in asymmetrical FPCs lends itself to an expansion of the debate on causality. We have demonstrated how performativity, which provides a new explanatory entry point for the FPA literature on FPCs, shaped the *flotilla* FPC. It was critical for determining the Israeli decision to act with force to take over the vessels on the high seas, in contravention of international law, and for shaping the specific military tactics used by the IDF. Equally, the methods of resistance used by the activists and their desire to stage a media event were driven significantly by performativity. In the asymmetrical FPC case examined here, the chess and bureaucratic logics were shown to be inapposite. We demonstrated, also, that social media were integral to

the *flotilla* FPC environment. Heeding Zeitzoff's claim, we did not focus merely on who was more empowered by the challenges and opportunities presented by social media. Instead, we also examined how the NSA and the state adapted their strategies and tactics to a hybrid environment with a co-presence of traditional and new media.

The findings in this article could usefully be harnessed to develop an expanded and exciting strand of work on asymmetrical FPCs occurring in distinct foreign policy spheres. One concerns clashes between states and environmental NSAs, for example, the incident leading to the sinking of Greenpeace's Rainbow Warrior Ship, on July 10, 1985, by the French Foreign Intelligence Services, as its crew was sailing to protest a planned nuclear experiment by France. More recent incidents include Russian armed forces breaking international law while storming a Greenpeace ship protesting against deep sea mining (Greenpeace 2015). Another would be the potential instigation of asymmetrical FPCs via interaction between insurrections groups, terrorist organizations, liberation movements, and states. Whereas this interaction has been studied in the context of hybrid and irregular wars, research on this dynamic as an FPC is scant. The ongoing interest of the FPA on FPC in crisis decision-making, foreign policy tools available in an FPC, crisis management, and the influence of the societal actors, among many others, would fit well with such an expanded and revitalized research agenda.

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