

Rational and Symbolic Components in the Justification of Ethnopolitical Conflicts

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Abstract. This article examines rationalist and symbolic approaches to the justification of ethnopolitical conflicts. The authors note that the rationalist approach, which interprets ethnic violence as the result of specific “calculations” made by political agents, is divided into two general directions. The first is based on the idea of the “ethnic security dilemma” and assumes that such conflicts begin with preventive violence driven by one political agent’s uncertainty about the intentions of the opposing side. The second emphasizes the role of so-called “predatory elites” who seek to use ethnic violence as a tool for boosting their legitimacy when other options have been exhausted. The authors emphasize that these directions do not account for the psycho-symbolic dimension of politics. In particular they do not consider the fact that ethnic violence may not have a purely rational basis and may stem instead from identity conflict, collective memory, and similar factors. By contrast, the symbolic interpretation developed by constructivist political scientists seeks to uncover the deeper nature of an ethnic conflict by analyzing its myth-symbol complex – i.e., by examining evocative symbols that become triggers of political violence. At the same time, this approach does not discount rationalist interpretations of ethnic violence and, to some extent, incorporates them. The authors attempt to analyze Israel’s military campaign in the Gaza Strip, which began in 2023, through the lenses of both rationalist and symbolic approaches.

Keywords: ethnopolitical conflict, ethnic security dilemma, predatory elite model, psycho-symbolic interpretation of politics, symbolic interpretation of conflict, military operation in the Gaza Strip.

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The share of the ethnic component in political conflicts today is quite significant. According to aggregated data presented by researchers from the University of Copenhagen, an average of about 20 armed conflicts considered ethnic by political scientists occur worldwide each year, meaning conflicts in which the opposing sides identify themselves and each other based on belonging to a particular ethnic or ethno-religious group [24, p. 8]. At the same time, the prevailing view in political science is that such conflicts are characterized by particularly high levels of violence, although some researchers attempt to challenge this view [25]. These ideas have predetermined the construction of the speculative “ancient hatreds argument” as a basis for ethnopolitical conflicts. However, with the development of constructivist understandings of ethnicity in opposition to primordialist interpretations, and thanks to the growing popularity of rational choice theory, the problem of ethnic violence has taken on instrumental and even economic dimensions. Believing that politicians redistribute material and other social goods in favor of their supporters to secure the necessary backing and votes, American political scientist James Fearon notes that ethnic traits facilitate the process of distinguishing between members of the “winning coalition” and everyone else [23]. In other words, he proposes the following thought experiment: If voting for the Democratic Party in the United States were to result in receiving economic benefits (if the party won), then all citizens would automatically begin to identify themselves as Democrats. However, ethnic characteristics are more difficult to fake, which means there is an opportunity to exclude potential “free riders” from the “winning coalition” and avoid reducing each supporter’s share of the public “pie.” This is precisely why, Fearon argues, politicians who practice the strategy of particularism will always have incentives to politicize ethnicity and provoke interethnic conflicts.

Fearon’s ideas illustrate how contemporary researchers often interpret ethnicity as a phenomenon that is largely politically constructed and politically activated.

In accordance with the basic methodological principles established in political science, the rational choice paradigm has for several decades been key to explaining the phenomenon of ethnic conflicts. Researchers have sought to eliminate as much as possible the cultural and ideological aspects of such conflicts and have attempted to portray the main actors as rational “utility maximizers,” not necessarily understood in strictly economic terms.

Within this approach, two main directions can be conditionally distinguished, differing in their identification of the most influential factor triggering ethnic violence. Stuart Kaufman referred to them as the “security dilemma” school and the “predatory elites” school [9].

The first school focuses on the problem of asymmetrical information about the opponent’s intentions, as well as the lack of a clear understanding of possible conflict outcomes, which leads to the decision to launch a preventive strike.

The second school views ethnic violence as a particular case of a “gamble for resurrection” – i.e., an attempt by an elite that is losing popularity to enhance its legitimacy by initiating a conflict against “others.” In this scenario, the social group that supports such politicians increases its backing of the elite, even if it acknowledges that the elite is largely responsible for the escalation.

The first school, which emphasizes information asymmetry, employs the classic “security dilemma” concept from international relations theory. According to this concept, each side is uncertain about the intentions of the other party and prefers to rely on military buildup as a means of minimizing losses. However, this does not go unnoticed by the other side, which responds in kind, ultimately leading to a spiral of escalation – illustrated, in particular, by the arms race between the superpowers during the Cold War.

One of the first researchers to attempt to apply this concept to interethnic conflicts was Barry Posen, who noted that, in an ethnic context, the security dilemma arises when a state is weakening [13]. While in international relations this dilemma stems from anarchy and uncertainty (from the realist perspective), interethnic tensions are generally smoothed over by the authority of central power. The list of conditions that actualize the security dilemma in the context of interethnic relations was eventually expanded to a significant degree: In addition to the weakness or absence of central authority, scholars began to take into account the atmosphere of fear and antagonism, the presence of “political space” for conflict, economic problems, and so on [2, p. 113].

In contemporary political science, the concept of the “ethnic security dilemma” (ESD) has become firmly established. Researchers working in this field have shown, in particular, that the most important factors in ethnic violence are the miscalculation of conflict outcomes (the initiator is usually overly optimistic) and the absence of credible commitment – when leaders of ethnic groups are unable to provide each other with reliable signals demonstrating the lack of hidden aggressive intentions. In such a situation, fearing that the other side is secretly preparing for conflict, the leader of an ethnic group decides to launch a preventive strike, reasoning, as Russell Hardin writes, that he can improve his chances of surviving the conflict if he preventively suppresses those with whom he is in conflict (see [5, p. 143]). The preemptive strike becomes the trigger for ethnic war.

The second school emphasizes the political opportunism of elites, who view ethnic war as a means of enhancing their legitimacy and remaining in power. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the joint work of Rui de Figueiredo and Barry Weingast, which develops the idea that ethnic conflict is an undesirable but nevertheless rational option for all parties [4]. Elites lack access to other tools for enhancing legitimacy, such as the ability to redistribute resources in favor of supporters; and given that retaining power and political capital is their priority, they choose ethnic violence. At the same time, their followers do not welcome the outbreak of ethnic war, but rationally begin to support their elites, believing the “others” to be the true culprits of the escalating tension and viewing their own leaders as defenders.

Thus, political scientists interpret ethnic conflicts through the lens of rational choice theory, relying heavily on concepts from the realist school in international relations. Nevertheless, in recent years, both Russian and international political science have seen the emergence of works asserting a certain subjectivity of political reality – in the sense that political processes and institutions depend on collective psychology, which is often irrational. However, to use the language of behavioral economics, this irrationality is “predictably irrational”: Research in cognitive and social psychology, and the identification of the most typical cognitive biases and heuristics, make it possible to predict irrational behavior with a certain degree of confidence. It should be noted that such behavior is irrational only from the perspective of an external observer evaluating the decisions made by a political agent based on their own assumptions; however, this issue is more philosophical and methodological in nature and lies beyond the scope of this study.

The trend toward studying the subjective-psychological factor in international relations found expression in the emergence of a new theoretical direction – constructivism – whose authors were described as “mainstream-accepted revolutionaries” [10, p. 105]. Constructivism introduced an interest in identities and socio-mental constructs as factors that actively influence politics. In this context, at the intersection of conflict studies, international relations theory, and psychology, a symbolic approach to ethno-political conflicts began to take shape.

The most comprehensive and consistent theoretical framework of this kind was developed by Stuart Kaufman, who sought to integrate it with the premise of the bounded rationality of political actors [8]. In his theory, he employed Anthony Smith’s concept of the “myth-symbol complex” [17], which serves as a cornerstone of ethnic consciousness, narrating the origins of a given ethnic group, its distinguishing traits, achievements, and primary antagonists (for example, other ethnic groups). From this perspective, the conflict-prone nature of a group’s myth-symbol complex is a reliable predictor of the potential for ethnic violence. In other words, if one ethnic group constructs its identity around a historical conflict with another, there is reason to assume that such an interpretation will sooner or later lead to actual armed confrontation. At the same time, it is important to understand that, on the one hand, such myths are an attractive tool for politicians, while on the other hand, they impose certain constraints on state and public actors. A striking example of these constraints in action is the 1995 assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by an ultra-right religious radical who believed that the prime minister’s attempt to resolve the long-standing Middle East conflict by signing the Oslo Accords with the Palestine Liberation Organization constituted a betrayal of Israel’s interests.

This does not mean, however, that a conflict-laden myth-symbol complex cannot evolve or be consciously modified through coordinated political efforts. Alice Ackermann cites quite a successful case of such modification in postwar Europe: While France and Germany had previously depicted each other as historically hostile states – even in school textbooks – after 1945 the situation began to gradually change [1].

Symbolic theory does not entirely reject the concept of rational choice, but it proceeds from the premise that political reasoning is always emotionally colored; therefore, a political agent's rational understanding of their interests is always intertwined with emotional responses to a given situation. It is worth noting that this idea largely reflects the view, accepted in contemporary cognitive psychology and behavioral economics, of "boundedly rational individuals," who more often operate on "cognitive autopilot" – making decisions based on emotions, stereotypes, and stimuli rather than a comprehensive analysis of an issue [11]. Researchers working within this framework develop the concept of evocative symbols as triggers of ethnic violence [14]. These symbols express an ethnic group's political interests, which are rational in a certain sense, but represent them through affective images and metaphors, offering a Manichaean "black-and-white" worldview. For example, in historical retrospect, the events of 1947-1949 (the founding of Israel and the first war) are perceived by Palestinians as the *nakba* (Arabic for catastrophe, upheaval, cataclysm), and the term itself carries a powerful emotional charge for Arabs [3]. In the collective memory of Israelis, on the contrary, these events symbolize national rebirth, the re-establishment of the ethnic state, and evoke strongly positive emotions. The use of evocative symbols in political communication accompanies ethnic conflicts.

According to political scientists working within this framework, an important driver of emerging conflicts is the struggle for "group worth" within an imagined hierarchy of ethnic groups [6, p. 143]. This imagined hierarchy is typically constructed in relation to one or several specific groups, rather than representing an actual ranked list. In other words, it is more accurately expressed as "We are better than Them," rather than "We occupy the N-th place on a list of the most prestigious ethnic groups."

It is important to note that hostile symbols and myths are a necessary but not sufficient condition for the outbreak of conflict: Every ethnic group usually maintains in its collective psyche a negative, even hostile, image of the "Other," but this does not always lead to large-scale confrontation. Serious security concerns within an ethnic group are also not enough on their own to trigger conflict, though they do significantly contribute to it.

In a certain sense, this situation resembles the ethological and psychological "fight or flight" phenomenon, but at the level of the ethnic community. Acknowledging the obvious limitations of this comparison, it should be noted that an ethnic group chooses the strategy of fighting when it has a relatively effective capacity to do so – tautological as that may sound. The capacity to organize ethnic violence has both spatial and resource dimensions. In other words, it requires the presence of a territorial base and effective means of carrying [the violence] out [18].

A territorial base typically implies a region of compact ethnic settlement, although theoretically it may also refer to the territory of a neighboring state interested in exacerbating interethnic tensions. As Russian researchers Irina Semenenko, Vladimir Lapkin, and Vladimir Pantin emphasize, "the politicization of ethno-national differences has today become an effective tool for advancing the interests of major players in global politics" [16, p. 79].

The effectiveness of the tools of ethnic violence has a multifaceted nature: It may involve the existence of ethnically based paramilitary organizations operating under weakened central authority, or the subordination of the state apparatus to a particular ethnic group and the organization of violence against “others” in alliance with state organizations – as has occurred in multiple instances of ethnic cleansing throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. For example, in 1995, the Croatian Army, during Operation Storm, effectively eliminated the Republic of Serbian Krajina, an effort accompanied by widespread violence against Serbs.

The symbolic approach offers a constructivist interpretation of the ethnic security dilemma, without entirely stripping it of its rationalist content, while emphasizing the subjective framing by decision-makers. The two approaches to ethnic violence discussed within the rational choice framework assert that the cornerstone of conflict is either security fears amid an information deficit or the “predatory” ambitions of elites seeking to boost their legitimacy. The symbolic approach allows us to argue that security and the struggle for power are interconnected phenomena: When leaders speak of security, they define it as the subjugation, weakening, or elimination of another ethnic group, thereby fusing security and power into a unified symbolic whole.

Case Study: Israel’s Military Operation in the Gaza Strip (2023-2024)

To test the rationalist and symbolic models of ethnopolitical conflict, the authors of this study selected the ongoing (as of summer 2024) conflict in the Gaza Strip and attempted to determine what drives the cabinet of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This conflict has a strongly pronounced ethnic and religious character, representing a clash primarily between Jewish society (secular and religious) and Arab society (predominantly religious).

Ethnic security dilemma. This study identified the potential for a rationalist interpretation of Israel’s military operation through the paradigm of the ethnic security dilemma. As previously noted, the key elements of this dilemma are distrust and informational asymmetry: Each side suspects the other of harboring secret intentions and seeking to carry out a surprise attack. According to research by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, strategic distrust is just as present on the Israeli side as on the Arab side: 79% of Israelis believe that the “other side” – the Palestinian population – is not trustworthy. Moreover, two-thirds of Israeli Jews and 38% of Israeli citizens of Arab origin believe that it is the Palestinian leadership that bears responsibility for the mistrust between the sides [27]. In fairness, it must be noted that Palestinians also believe that Israel cannot be trusted, and the majority of them view the Israeli leadership as having derailed attempts to build trust between the two sides.

A balanced approach to conflict resolution, advocated in particular by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, holds that “a concrete peace agreement that takes into account the rights of both Israelis and Palestinians is necessary for lasting regional stability” [15, p. 397]. However, mutual distrust, combined with

decades of sporadic violence, creates an ideal environment for the formation of an ethnic security dilemma and generates incentives for preventive violence on both sides.

Predatory elites model. At the same time, the study also found evidence pointing to the role of “predatory elites” in the current conflict. Prime Minister Netanyahu’s cabinet faced a crisis of legitimacy and mass protests triggered by a highly unpopular judicial reform, which Israeli society perceived as an assault on democratic governance. Against this backdrop, the October 2023 attack by Hamas was described as “the most catastrophic event that Israel has faced since its creation” and “it was under Netanyahu’s watch” [26]. Such an attack would have been extremely sensitive for any government, but for the current prime minister it was doubly so, as he had built his political image around a security narrative and even earned the unofficial nickname “Mr. Security” among political commentators [28]. It should also be noted that Netanyahu’s political career received a major boost in 1996 during a wave of mass violence against Israelis: His hardline, hawkish stance on Palestine enabled him to defeat political heavyweight Shimon Peres, who advocated a diplomatic approach. Irina Zvyagelskaya agrees with this view, noting that “both Ben-Gurion and Netanyahu consistently emphasized the security issue and regarded threat reduction primarily through the use of force actions” [19, p. 97].

That is why the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, became the greatest challenge Netanyahu had ever faced. Combined with the legitimacy crisis brought on by the judicial reform, it created strong incentives to adopt a “gamble for resurrection” political strategy – a set of forceful measures aimed at radically addressing the Palestinian issue and, as a result, boosting Netanyahu’s popularity in Israeli society. The prime minister clearly articulated his intentions in an address on October 9, saying that the images of devastation and destruction from Hamas strongholds “is just the beginning.... I said that every place from which Hamas operates will turn into ruins. It is already happening today, it will happen even more in the future” [22].

It should be noted that, of course, Netanyahu is acting “reactively,” responding predominantly to the actions of Hamas, which makes it problematic to fully assert confirmation of the “predatory elites” model. On the other hand, the scale of Israel’s military response and the prime minister’s rhetoric suggest that he is using the situation to implement a “gamble for resurrection” political strategy. At the same time, preliminary data indicate that, paradoxically, while Israeli society supports Netanyahu’s policy toward Palestine, it continues to favor his departure. Ron Kampeas, a columnist with *The Times of Israel*, cites the opinion of public opinion researcher Dahlia Sheindlin: “There’s a rally around the flag for the war but a deep resentment against the government” [26]. This paradox merits separate investigation, but as a hypothesis, it may be attributed to a relatively high level of critical thinking, due to the considerable educational attainment of Israeli society: The country ranks sixth or seventh globally alongside the US in terms of higher education prevalence (Canada ranks first, Russia second) [20].

Symbolic interpretation of the conflict. The intensity of Israel’s military campaign in the Gaza Strip points to the presence of “ancient hatreds,” which

provide fertile ground for large-scale violence. Numerous media reports clearly indicate that the Israeli Army is treating the local population with extreme brutality, prompting some observers to even speak of war crimes being committed during the campaign. A detailed analysis of combat operations lies outside the scope of this study, but the sheer concentration of violence underscores the need to analyze the situation not only through rationalist models.

The myth-symbol complex of the modern state of Israel was formed based on the collective memory of centuries of persecution of the Jews, culminating in the Holocaust. It is for this reason that political Zionism is primarily associated with the idea of creating a powerful state capable of using military and intelligence services to protect its citizens from such persecution in the future. In pursuing this goal, emphasis is placed on the necessity of delivering decisive preventive strikes against potential adversaries – an idea that is inherently embedded in Israeli military thought. Researchers from the American think tank Rand Corporation*¹ note: “Israel’s strategic doctrine has displayed a strong preference for anticipatory attacks. In addition to helping deter Israel’s enemies and achieve decisive victories, striking first has also helped to circumvent the constraints within which Israel must operate” [12, p. 190]. At the same time, some authors explain the notion of preventive strikes not so much through historical memory as through the particularities of the Middle East’s geostrategic landscape [21].

When speaking of evocative symbols, one must first note the concept of “Greater Israel,” which is almost officially enshrined in documents of the current government that assert: “The Jewish people have an exclusive and inalienable right to all parts of the Land of Israel ... including the biblical parts of the West Bank – Judea and Samaria” [7, p. 82]. Other evocative symbols that influence Israeli politics include the idea of the Promised Land, the image of Jerusalem, the collective memory of military victories – including the Six-Day War – as well as the notion of Israel as the national homeland of the Jewish people.

With regard to the resource base, it is important to emphasize that Israel possesses substantial political resources, including a well-trained army, an extensive intelligence network, modern weaponry, and support from the US. Moreover, Israel has, of course, a territorial base from which to conduct a military campaign in the Gaza Strip.

The symbolic approach offers an alternative interpretation of the ethnic security dilemma by linking it to Netanyahu’s ambitions for power. He built his political career as a statesman committed to ensuring Israel’s security by any means necessary. It should also be noted that the current prime minister belongs to the generation born immediately after the Holocaust and, in his youth, he repeatedly participated in Israel’s military campaigns, reportedly taking part in special operations deep in enemy territory.

For this reason, the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, can be seen as a direct challenge to the symbolic foundations of Netanyahu’s authority, undermining his legitimating narrative. It is therefore plausible to suggest that the military campaign in the Gaza Strip is also motivated by a sense of personal revenge on the part of the Israeli prime minister – he is counting on the complete destruction

of all Palestinian paramilitary organizations in order to restore his legitimacy and preserve the coherence of his narrative. At the same time, he likely realizes that he will ultimately have to leave office once the military campaign ends, so for him the campaign may be more about shaping his personal legacy in history rather than maintaining control in the country. This, in turn, helps explain the extreme severity of the measures taken by the Israeli Army in the current conflict.

Conclusion

Using the Palestinian-Israeli armed confrontation in the Gaza Strip as a case study, the authors of this article tested rationalist and symbolic models for explaining ethnopolitical conflicts. The study found that there is a high level of mutual distrust between Israelis and Palestinians, which provides fertile ground for the emergence of an ethnic security dilemma and, consequently, an inclination toward preventive strikes. Furthermore, attention should be drawn to the fact that the Israeli government faced a legitimacy crisis triggered by a deeply unpopular judicial reform – one that could potentially be resolved through a “gamble for resurrection” strategy, lending support to the predatory elites model. However, given that the current phase of the conflict was not initiated by the Israeli authorities, it is difficult to fully affirm this model in this case.

At the same time, the intensity of the conflict at its current stage suggests the existence of a symbolic component, which on the Israeli side is expressed through a set of evocative symbols that include references to historical persecution, the concept of “Greater Israel,” the image of the Promised Land, and the collective memory of past military victories. Based on this symbolic foundation, a belief takes shape about the need to unleash devastating and ruthless blows on the enemy.

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Note

¹ Declared an undesirable organization on the territory of Russia by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation.