
THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

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Listen to the language of Arab-Israeli conflict. The Yom Kippur War. The War of Ramadan. Zionism is the national liberation movement of the Jewish people. Zionism is racism. The administered territories. The occupied territories. The West Bank. Southern Syria. Judea and Samaria. Sometimes it is said of a conflict that it is merely symbolic. As if symbols were not central to most conflicts and fundamentally inseparable from the material aspects.

Every conflict takes place in a particular symbolic environment. Political discourse surrounding Arab-Israeli conflict draws on a catalogue of available idea elements, and makes use of a variety of symbolic devices to express these ideas. This set of idea elements, organized and clustered in various ways, comprises the political culture of the conflict.

This culture is rooted in time and space. The political culture of Arab-Israeli conflict is not the same today as it was in 1948. There is one political culture in Israel, a different one in Arab countries, and still another in the United States. The catalogue from which the Gush Emunim in Israel draw their symbolism has no counterpart in the United States. The idea of jihad or holy war in Arab culture has no counterpart in American culture.

Events, such as the Sadat visit to Jerusalem, or the onset of a war, provide an occasion for display of the political culture. Spokesmen for various parties in the conflict display it in their pronouncements on these events. Journalists display it in their commentary on the events. Major events affecting the conflict make the culture visible and provide us with an opportunity to analyse it.

In the larger study of which this paper is a part, we examine a number of issues using the same approach. Hence, before turning specifically to Arab-Israeli conflict, I will outline our general strategy for analysing the culture of any issue or conflict.

The Nature of Issue Cultures

The idea elements in a culture do not exist in isolation but are grouped into more or less harmonious clusters or interpretive packages. The different idea elements in a given package mutually support and reinforce each other. Frequently, it is possible to suggest the package as a whole by the use of a single prominent element.

We begin our analysis of political culture by dividing these packages into two parts. The framing half deals with the gestalt or pattern-organizing nature of the political culture. A number of writers have employed similar concepts to analyse this framing process. Edelman (1964, 1971, 1977), for example, has sensitized us to the importance of political symbolism in providing meaning to political events. Bennett (1975) attempts to capture this idea with the concept of political scenario, inspired by the work of Burke (1969). He suggests that political scenarios provide a "lay theoretical framework in which to organize the sense data of politics" (p. 65). He points to the use of paradigmatic or compelling examples to provide a highly abstract, symbolic container to deal with an unfolding reality.

The second half of the package deals with reasoning and justifications for positions. Where framing devices suggest integration and synthesis into wholes, reasoning devices emphasize analysis and differentiation into parts. A complex whole is broken down into discrete causes and consequences in temporal sequence. These devices are pieces of a potential argument that one might make in justifying or arguing for a particular position on an issue.

An interpretive package has a core consisting of an overall frame and position that defines it. The frame suggests a central organizing idea for understanding events related to the issue in question. For example, the Johnson Administration package on Vietnam offered a core frame in which the Vietnam struggle was to be understood as the United States attempting to meet the challenge of indirect

aggression by a worldwide, Soviet-led communist adversary. This framework allows for some differences on the best way to meet this challenge — through counter-insurgent special forces, airpower, or other means -- but the common position endorsed the necessity of making an effective military response in resisting the challenge.

One can display a package other than through directly invoking its core. Through political usage, we come to recognize the package as a whole by the use of a variety of symbolic devices ¹ that display its characteristic elements. Every package has a signature — a set of elements that suggest its core frame and position in a shorthand fashion. The falling domino metaphor is a good example for the Vietnam package described above.

These signature elements of a package are the condensing symbols by which it is displayed. As Willett suggests (1980), in discussing art in the Third Reich. "Style is crucial, just as language is crucial; the Nazis so put their mark on them that a few words in a speech or article, a quick look at a building, statue or picture, could imply all the rest of the ideological package, and with it the measures to which that package led."

We divide our signature elements into framing and reasoning devices. The devices that suggest a framework within which to view the issue are metaphors, exemplars, catch-phrases, depictions, and visual images. The devices that provide justifications or reasons for a general position are roots, consequences, and appeals to principle. Each of these requires a brief comment and example.

1. Metaphors. A metaphor always has two parts — the principal subject that the metaphor is intended to illuminate and the associated subject that the metaphor evokes to enhance our understanding. The associated subject contains what Lakoff and Johnson (1979) call "entailments". These entailments are characteristics of the associated subject that, by implication, attach to the principal subject.

We distinguish two kinds of entailments -- attributes and relationships -- and this distinction suggests two kinds of metaphors. In dynamic metaphors, there are two or more entities in the associated subject, acting in relation to each other. In single-valued metaphors the focus is simply on the attributes of a single associated subject.

2. Exemplars. While metaphors rely on imagined events to frame the principal subject, real events of the past or present are frequently used for the same purpose. The Korean War was probably the most important exemplar for the Vietnam example, with Munich receiving some play as well.

3. Catch-Phrases. Commentators on events frequently try to capture their essence in a single theme statement, tag-line, title or slogan that is intended to suggest a general frame. Catch-phrases are attempted summary statements about the principal subject. "Invasion from the North" was the title of the State Department paper produced just prior to the Johnson Administration escalation of the Vietnam War in 1965. "If we don't stop them in Vietnam, we'll be fighting them on the beaches of Malibu" is another memorable catch-phrase for this package.

4. Depictions. Packages have certain principal subjects that they characterize in a particular fashion. They may do this through single-valued metaphors or exemplars or simply through some colorful string of modifiers. Lyndon Johnson depicted the critics of his Vietnam policy as "nervous nellies" and a later administration gave us "nattering nabobs of negativism".

5. Visual images. We include here icons and other visual images that suggest the core of a package. The American Flag is the most obvious icon associated with this Vietnam package but there are a number of visual images that suggest its frame -- for example, imagery underlining the Communist nature of the adversary in Vietnam.

6. Roots. A given package has a characteristic analysis of the causal dynamics underlying the strip of events. The packages may differ in the locus of this root --

that is, in the particular place in a funnel of causality to which the root calls attention. The root provided in the Vietnam package is that of a military attack by a Soviet proxy against a United States ally and independent country.

7. Consequences. A given package has a characteristic analysis of the consequences that will flow from different policies. Again, there may be differences in whether short or long term consequences are the focus. The signature consequences emphasized in the Vietnam illustration are the negative effects on American national security of a communist takeover of South Vietnam.

8. Appeals to principle. Packages rely on characteristic moral appeals and uphold certain general precepts. In the Vietnam example, the principles appealed to included the defense of the weak and innocent against unprovoked aggression and the honoring of one's word and commitment to friends.

One can summarize the culture of an issue in a signature matrix in which the rows represent the cores of different packages and the columns represent the eight different types of symbolic device. The cell entries in this matrix are the signature elements of the different packages — for example, a characteristic exemplar of a given package.

Interpretive packages are produced in a complex process involving an interaction between sources and journalists. While this social process is not a direct focus in our research, our examination of cultural elements is organized in part on some assumptions about the social and political system.

Our view of the political system utilizes distinctions made by students of collective action (Tilly, 1978; McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Gamson, 1975). There is a bounded polity consisting of authorities and members who have vested interests and routine, low-cost access to authorities. Beyond the boundary, there are challenges or social movement organizations attempting to mobilize some constituency for collective action, directed toward influencing outcomes produced through the polity.

These actors — authorities, members, and challengers -- utilize the cultural system in their efforts to achieve their goals. More specifically, they attempt to further the careers of particular interpretive packages and act as sponsor or organizational carriers for some of these packages. It is useful to identify packages with particular sponsors. For example, we expect to identify one or more official packages on an issue — packages that reflect the frames and positions of the public officials who are protagonists in the strip of events. The opposition political party, or established interest groups, may be identified with other packages. Finally, there may be packages associated with challengers and, perhaps, found only in the publications which they control and direct to their own constituency.

These various actors in the symbolic arena frequently are organizations with media or public relations specialists. Such professionals maintain continuing relationships with journalists who cover their organization. Many have previously worked as journalists. To be effective, their present role requires that they become attuned to the news needs of the mass media representatives with whom they routinely must deal. In meeting these needs, they supply, with varying degrees of skill, the elements of interpretive packages about the issues that engage their interests. An apt metaphor or catch-phrase will be picked-up and amplified through the media — serving the interest of both sources and journalists in presenting events in a context of meaning. Sources, then, are one major fount of cultural elements.

But journalists are themselves highly active in organizing such elements. Indeed, there are journalistic roles that emphasize precisely this task. Political cartoonists, political columnists, and editorial writers, for example, are evaluated by their fellow journalists and readers for their talent in this regard. Halberstam (1979) describes the admiration that his colleagues felt for Peter Lisagor of the Chicago Daily News as a coiner of succinct catch-phrases: "It was Lisagor—smart, quick, verbal—who always seemed to be able to define an event in a few words. Other reporters were always

quoting Lisagor." Columnists with a light touch--Art Buchwald and Russell Baker, for example--are especially creative in generating extended, dynamic metaphors.

Constructing a signature matrix is the first step in analysing the culture of an issue. The signature matrix can be used as a basic set of coding categories for a systematic analysis of mass media materials. We choose a series of stimulus events as sampling points for examining commentary on an issue.

Israel's declaration of independence on May 15, 1948 is our first sampling point for studying Arab-Israeli conflict. The Sinai War in October and November, 1956, is next. The Six-Day War in June 1967, the October 1973 War, the Sadat visit to Jerusalem in November, 1977, the Camp David Accord in September 1978, and the Sadat assassination in October, 1981 complete the current strip--although we may add new events that occur in the course of the study.

Our study focuses exclusively on American political culture. Hence, we are seeking events likely to stimulate commentary on the posture that the United States has taken or ought to take toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. More specifically, we examine materials for a two week period following the stimulus event, drawing two samples:

1. A city sample is used to measure prominence of display in a metropolitan area. For this sample, we include all news and commentary about the Arab-Israeli conflict appearing in: (a) The metropolitan dailies in an area, (b) The three major newsmagazines, Time, Newsweek, and US News and World Report, and (c) From about 1970 on, television network news coverage on ABC, CBS, and NBC.

2. A commentator sample is used to measure media usage pattern. We examine all syndicated cartoonists and columnists whose work appears in a regionally stratified sample of the 50 largest metropolitan dailies. The resulting set of cartoons and columns on the Middle East gives us a measure of the popularity of particular symbolic devices and packages among this set of cultural entrepreneurs.

The Arab-Israeli Conflict: Interpretive Packages

Our content analysis of this issue is still in an early stage — we have begun compiling the relevant material but have not begun coding it. This paper will simply present the interpretive packages and their characteristic symbolic devices that will provide the basis of our analysis. These are, we suggest, the basic frameworks available in the American symbolic environment for organizing one's thinking about this issue.

Strategic Interest

Action in the Middle East must be seen as part of the global chess game with the Soviet Union. It happens at the moment to be the center of action in this larger game. The West lost one of its important pieces in the Iranian revolution but, at least, this piece was not captured by the other side.

Perhaps Risk rather than Chess is the appropriate board game metaphor to reflect the volatility of the Middle East. Egypt, now a Western piece, was formerly a Soviet piece. Iraq, once solidly a Soviet piece, is in danger of being lost to their side, but our side needs to worry about losing the very important Saudi piece. Losing that piece could mean the whole game, American officials tell us. Selling AWACS planes to the Saudi's is a move to keep that piece secure.

For exemplars, this package can go back to 1946 when Soviet troops moved on Iran and were forced to withdraw from the Azerbaijan region under pressure from the West. The example of Soviet military aid to various countries of the Middle East and North Africa and the presence of Cuban troops are further examples of Soviet designs, topped off with the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. The lesson is clear: the Soviet Union is actively seeking to expand its influence in the Middle East.

The beauty of the Camp David accord is that it excluded the Soviet Union from the peace process. Since the Soviet role in the conflict is exclusively a mischievous one, this can only be a plus. The Soviet Union gains by exploiting the indigenous

conflicts in the region for its own imperial aims. These indigenous conflicts are complicated enough without the presence of a party whose aim is not peace but continuation of the conflict for the opportunities it presents.

For a visual image, try a large grizzly bear, duly branded with a hammer and sickle, hovering menacingly over the succulent lambs of the Middle East.

The core issue in this organizing frame is how to best pursue America's strategic interests in the Middle East vis-a-vis the Soviet Union. Republican and Democratic Administrations, in turn, have acted as official sponsors of this package with only minor variations between them — although some flirtations with other packages appear from time to time.

The Cold War is at the root of the conflict. Without Soviet exploitation of the issues, Arab-Israeli conflict would be resolvable or, at the least, could be contained and localized. The most profound danger to world peace is the kind of Soviet success in the Middle East that would upset the world balance of power, thereby greatly increasing Western vulnerability and the Soviet temptation to exploit it. The basic moral appeal of this package is the defense of the Free World.

David and Goliath

On one side, less than one million Jews, many of them the dispossessed victims of the Holocaust. On the other side, 20 Arab countries with a population of 100 million. Through ingenuity, resourcefulness, and courage, the beleaguered Jewish settlement in Palestine was able to forestall the attack of five Arab armies. Home-made weapons like the Davidka were David's contemporary version of the sling shot. Goliath, the bewildered giant, backed off, temporarily defeated but unreconciled.

The world must believe those who say they want to push the Jews into the sea or destroy the state of Israel. Hitler made his intentions clear but the West watched without resisting as he acquired the means and began carrying out his designs. Never

again. With a state of their own, Jews have the means of organizing their own means of self defense.

Zionism is the national movement of the Jewish people and the UN resolution condemning it as "racism" is an obscenity. It reflects the political power of a large block of implacable enemies of Israel in the United Nations. The UN does not function as a neutral arbiter interested in peace but as a partisan instrument of the Arab side in the conflict. While Goliath can not use his size advantage to crush David militarily, he can use it to win political victories. Arab leaders, who proclaim their undying enmity and hatred of Israel, brandish weapons and are feted in the halls of diplomacy.

The core of the conflict is the unwillingness of the Arab world to accept Israel's right to exist. The Sadat visit to Jerusalem was a historic breakthrough which spoke to the root of the issue. But Sadat was isolated in the Arab world and his death was greeted with open joy in most Arab countries. The conflict will not end as long as Arab zealots, unwilling to make peace with Israel, continue to be the dominant force in most of the Arab world.

The appeal to principle in this package is the right of any people to live in peace and security — especially a people that has been the victim of a long history of oppression. The United States has a moral obligation to help Israel survive in a hostile environment, and to encourage the Arab countries to accept Israel's right to exist.

Feuding Neighbors

The Arabs and Jews are fractious peoples. Like the Hatfields and the McCoys, each is convinced that it is aggrieved. Each new attack keeps the feud going, stimulating further retaliation by the other side. In such a blood feud, neither side deserves much sympathy and claims of justice and entitlement can be safely ignored. A plague on both houses.

The problem is that such a local quarrel can spread to engulf the whole world. Take World War I as an exemplar. A local assassination in the Balkans set off a chain of events that eventually drew the major powers into a World War. American concern should be with the innocent bystanders that are hurt in such a feud and the danger that it will spread into an even larger conflict. For visual images, try a time bomb or a tinder box that any stray spark can set aflame.

The root cause of the conflict is the destructive cycle of hostile acts that stimulate a hostile response, and the unwillingness of both sides to forget the injuries of the past and make peace. The Camp David accord was a hopeful sign since it represents at least a partial reconciliation and end to the feud. But the Sadat assassination suggests how fragile is the peace in such a conflict, and how easily the cycle of mutual hostility could begin again — if indeed, it has ever really ceased.

The appeal to principle here is to live and let live. Let bygones be bygones. The United States should try to mediate the dispute as best it can but it should avoid taking major risks that would involve America directly in the fighting in the Middle East.

Dual Liberation

There are two national liberation movements in the Middle East, in conflict over the same land. Palestinian Arabs and Jews can both make a legitimate historical claim. But history is less important to human justice than is present human reality. Whatever should have happened 2000 years ago, or 200 years ago, or 20 years ago, today both an Israeli people and a Palestinian people exist.

Any workable solution must respect the national aspirations and right to self determination of both peoples. A conflict between two incompatible rights can only be solved by compromise. Israel and Palestine, not one or the other.

Other warring peoples have come to live in peace with each other. Belgium and the Netherlands did not work as a unitary state but the two peoples, living in

separate states, maintain good stable relations and close economic ties.

Palestinian and other Arab spokesmen must accept Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state in the Middle East. Israel, at the same time, should accept the fact that the Palestinian issue is not merely a refugee problem; that there is a Palestinian national movement that can only be satisfied by some form of Palestinian state.

The Camp David accord improves the atmosphere and is an important step toward Arab recognition of Israel. But it does not address the Palestinian issue which is at the root of the conflict. This package appeals to the principle of self-determination for all peoples. The United States should work toward a compromise in which Israel's right to exist in secure, recognized borders is accepted and some sort of Palestinian state is created.

Western Imperialism.

The key to understanding this conflict is the recognition that Israel is an American instrument which is used to maintain Western control over the resources of the Middle East and the Arab people. The Zionist entity is the attack dog of its American master. It is comparable to other European settler states that have tried to maintain dominance over the indigenous population of a region. Witness South Africa or Rhodesia.

Zionism is racism. Arab violence in opposition to it is a symptom, and a response to injustice. The PLO are freedom fighters, using the only means available to a stateless people. Sadat, by making a separate peace with Israel without requiring progress on the Palestinian issue, betrayed the Arab cause. By removing the threat of war, he left the Palestinians and their Arab allies at the mercy of the Zionist entity, armed to the teeth with the latest in American technology. Sadat gambled everything on U.S. imperialist patronage.

The root of the conflict is the effort to maintain Western domination of the region. This leads to heavy American military support for Israel and increases its

intransigence. This package appeals to the moral principle of national liberation and justice for the Palestinian people. The United States should abandon the economic and political structure that requires the maintenance of world empire. Short of that, the United States should abandon its support for the Zionist state.

The Jewish Conspiracy variation.

Three of the packages can quite easily assimilate a sub-package which emphasizes a domestic Jewish conspiracy. To switch metaphors for a moment, if the packages are lens through which one views events in the conflict, this is an attachable filter for some lenses.

In this variation, American Jews and the "Israeli lobby" use their economic influence to get the United States involved on the side of Israel. Many American Jews place loyalty to Israel above loyalty to the United States, like fifth columnists during World War II. The Zionist lobby is a powerful force in American life, stemming from Jewish control of the banks and the mass media.

As an accessory for the Strategic Interest package, this variation emphasizes the ways in which the United States is diverted from pursuing its national interests. The vastly greater oil resources and numbers in the Arab world make it a richer prize. By siding too much with Israel, the United States provides the Soviet Union with opportunities that it would otherwise lack and increases the vulnerability of the Western oil life line. Jewish pressure diverts American policy from its most advantageous course.

As an accessory for the Feuding Neighbors package, this variation emphasizes Jewish pressure for American economic and military aid and the risks of direct United States military involvement. As an accessory for the Western Imperialism package, this variation emphasizes Jewish participation and encouragement in pursuing American imperialist designs in the Middle East. This accessory is not available with the David and Goliath or Dual Liberation packages.

These packages and variations are summarized in Chart 1: A signature matrix for Arab-Israeli conflict.

Resonances with Cultural Themes

Beyond the issue culture, there is a larger political culture containing what are usually called ideologies or belief systems. These meta-packages contain more general idea elements with potential applicability to a range of issues. We deal with this level of analysis through the concept of cultural themes. These themes may be thought of in a manner similar to packages — that is, they contain a core frame and a set of signature elements that provide this frame in shorthand.

We view themes as existing in a dialectic relationship with counter themes. Expression of a counter theme has an adversarial quality; it is more common in the belief systems sponsored by challenging groups than in those of members. Themes, in contrast, have the status of pieties; one can safely intone them on ceremonial occasions with the assumption of general social approval, albeit some private cynicism.

The themes we focus on provide core frameworks for viewing politics in American society. They are analytically independent of one another but not mutually exclusive. Each of the themes and counter themes has a rich literature in which it is expressed or discussed. We have described these themes and suggested some of their roots in another paper (see Gamson and Lasch, forthcoming, 1982) and I will not repeat this discussion here.

One theme in particular is relevant for Arab-Israeli conflict — the self-reliance theme. This theme emphasizes striving, risk-taking, achieving, and independence. To try hard against difficult obstacles is creditable. To fail because of lack of effort when success is possible is reprehensible. Calculated risk-taking is frequently necessary to overcome obstacles and, indeed, is part of striving. One cannot expect everything to fall one's way and bad luck is simply an obstacle that one must overcome — not something to whine about.

Starting out poor is a special case of bad luck. The truly admirable are those

who, by striving, were able to overcome the obstacles of humble birth and go on to fame and fortune. The self-made man embodies all of the above — a person who has pluck and resourcefulness, tries hard, makes use of the opportunities that come his way and isn't thrown off or demoralized by the bad luck he encounters, learns by his mistakes and improves, until he makes it. Horatio Alger.

"The 'success story' and the respect accorded to the self-made man are distinctly American, if anything is," writes Williams (1960). "The ideal individual struggles successfully against adversity and overcomes more powerful forces. . . 'Self-made' men and women remain attractive, as do people who overcome poverty or bureaucracy," writes Gans (1979).

The best thing that we can teach children is how to stand on their own two feet. The people to admire are those who start at the bottom and work hard to get ahead, relying on their own judgment and resources rather than on others.

Our strategy involves analyzing the various packages on an issue for resonance with such themes. The David and Goliath package, I would argue, has some strong resonances with it. It provides an image of struggle against adversity and overwhelming odds. Ingenuity, resourcefulness, and risk-taking are central to the image of Israel in this package, exemplified in the Entebbe rescue mission and many other feats. Such resonance with an important cultural theme gives this package a special appeal, amplifying it and increasing its media usage, prominence of display, and popular usage.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a general strategy for analysing the political culture of an issue. This paper takes the first step on an analysis of Arab-Israeli conflict but other international conflicts could be subjected to similar treatment.

I would emphasize that the development of a signature matrix is merely the beginning of analysis. What does one do with such a taxonomy? In our research, we

measure media usage and prominence of display of the different packages over time, using a systematic sample of mass media materials. The ebb and flow of prominence and media usage provides an important reading of political culture and challenges us to explain the observed changes. Thanks to such modern conveniences as video-tape and microfilm, we are able to follow different packages over a period of 20 or 30 years, charting their careers in the mass media. This analysis becomes more interesting still when we consider it jointly with popular usage and support, a step we will be beginning shortly.

Political symbolism, I have argued, is not an epiphenomenon but a central component of conflict. The Sadat visit to Jerusalem was a symbolic act of great power and importance. "We really and truly welcome you to live among us in peace and security," Sadat told the Israeli Knesset and a worldwide television audience. Not mere words, but political symbols that created a new reality in Arab-Israeli conflict.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Tropes" or "figures of speech" are other terms for these symbolic devices.

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