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Research Paper

War on Terror Binaries and the Politics of Israeli Palestinian Legitimacy

Introduction

The post 9/11 era has left lasting political legacies in terms of military as well as legal implications. However, one could argue that the most crucial legacy of all is the narrative it has solidified in its wake. The War on Terror supplied a grammar for deciding who counts as civilized, rational, democratic, and therefore only conditionally entitled to rights. That grammar mattered far beyond United States campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. It especially reshaped how Western political discourse interpreted the conflict between Palestine and Israel. In the years after September, 2001, terrorism became the master category through which violence, sovereignty, and national identity were assessed. Hence, the long discourse of territorial, nationalist, and legal conflict was gradually recoded into a moral struggle between terror and democracy.

The central research question of this essay is therefore, ‘to what extent has the War on Terror’s “us vs them” narrative shaped the framing of Israeli and Palestinian identities, and how has that framing influenced perceptions of legitimacy and political rights?’ Hence, the central thesis of this paper is that the War on Terror did not create Israeli or Palestinian identities, rather it thoroughly rescripted their meaning in the US and broader Western political culture. Within this script, Israel has increasingly been depicted as part of a civilized and democratic “us”. This

encapsulates a state that is fighting the same enemies as the West. On the other hand, the Palestinians are more easily narrated and compressed into a racialized and securitized “them,” associated with religious extremism, terrorism, and political unreliability. The result of this “us vs them” narrative did not mean the complete erasure of Palestinian rights on paper; international law continued to recognize them. However, it did make those rights appear conditional in public discourse. Conditional in the sense that Palestinian claims to statehood, representation, and self determination had to be earned through prior demonstrations of innocence, moderation, and ideological purification in a way Israeli claims generally did not.

This essay proceeds in five sections moving forward. “The War on Terror’s Discursive Architecture” explains how post 9/11 rhetoric created a moral and civilizational binary that exceeded any single battlefield. The following section, “Israel inside the Category of Us” shows how Israeli leaders and their US allies successfully aligned Israeli state power with the democratic side of that binary. Contrastingly, “Palestinians inside the Category of Them” examines how Palestinians were more readily framed as suspect subjects and how naming practices helped make that framing appear natural. Followed by, "Legitimacy, Political Rights, and the Burden of Innocence” tracks how these identity frames affected public opinion, legal visibility, and rights claims. Lastly, “Endurance, Countercurrents, and Limits” then considers what this argument can and cannot explain.

The War on Terror’s Discursive Architecture

September 20, 2001, George W. Bush announced a military campaign in an address to Congress. However, this announcement was tailored for a far greater purpose. He turned this military campaign or the “War on Terror” into an existential moral test in a lot of aspects. He

described the struggle as one between fear and freedom. He declared that every state had to decide whether it stood with the United States or "with the terrorists." Ultimately, therefore cast the conflict along the notion of "civilization's fight." However, it would be necessary to highlight that Bush did not exclusively label Islam as the enemy. However, the speech he delivered has a rhetorical structure that organized global politics into a stark binary between legitimate defenders of order and illegitimate enemies of civilization. Therefore, it is necessary to note here that enemies of civilization essentially were Islamic extremists who were against the Western structure of civilization and the United States; one of the major advocates of that said Western structure. Nonetheless, the stark binary became one of the defining interpretive habits of the next two decades.

Subsequently, numerous scholarship has shown that the War on Terror was never only a set of military operations. Scholars such as Harmonie Toros, Richard Jackson, and Lee Jarvis argue that the War on Terror functioned as a broader discourse and security paradigm (Toros, Jarvis, and Jackson 1-8); a shorthand for wars, detention regimes, new bureaucracies, extraordinary legal practices, and normalized ways of imagining threat. Their central point proved to be especially beneficial here. The war on Terror changed policy, but it also changed the very notion on which political belonging and security are discussed. Essentially, once "terrorism" became the main focus and lens, people started judging and labeling others very quickly without even examining the facts. Hence, labelling individuals with certain political identities and branding someone a terrorist was rather easy to do so.

This post 9/11 framework was also deeply backed by older and much ancient intellect traditions. The logic behind the new binary closely resembled Edward Said's Orientalism. Essentially, the West defines itself by producing an inferior and threatening East, a civilizational

other against which Western identity appears rational and moral (Britannica Editors). Later works of assessments have also backed up this "othering" notion. For instance, Mahmood Mamdani's Good Muslim, Bad Muslim, and Jasbir Puar's Terrorist Assemblages helped show how the "Muslim" could be split into acceptable and unacceptable forms, or into governable and ungovernable bodies, within that overarching field of suspicion (Mamdani) (Puar). However, it is again important to note that these acceptable and unacceptable types of Muslims are again defined and implemented within the broader discourse by the West. Hence, to get back on the argument, post 9/11 public opinion research moved in the same direction. John Sides and Kimberly Gross showcased the negative stereotypes of Muslims correlated with support for War on Terror policies (Sides and Gross 583). More recently, works by Nazita Lajevardi have also shown that persistent negative media depictions of Muslims shaped mass attitudes in exclusionary directions (Lajevardi 1060). Hence, due to the actions of a Muslim extremist group, an entire global community was vilified because of the religion they chose to practice.

Nonetheless, the above points matter because the Israeli Palestine conflict entered the Western debate far before 9/11. However post 9/11, it re-entered the Western debate under a new lens of religious bigotry. Once "terrorism" became the master frame, the conflict was no longer heard primarily as a dispute over land, occupation, refugees, sovereignty, or unequal power. It was increasingly processed as a test of who belonged to "the civilized world" and who did not. A recent Journal of Public Policy article describes the post 9/11 period as one in which American national identity was reinvigorated and Islam and its adherents were, often indiscriminately, constructed as enemies of America. That broader construction formed the atmosphere in which Israeli and Palestinian identities were interpreted.

Israel Inside the Category of Us

Israeli leaders moved quickly and effectively to establish Israel inside the democratic “us”. In a testimony before the US House Committee on Government Reform on September 20, 2001, Benjamin Netanyahu argued that the anti- Western terror network sought to reverse history, and he described Israel as “the Middle East’s only democracy” and as a manifestation of Western progress and freedom (“Preparing for the War on Terrorism”). He urged the United States to form a coalition of democracies willing to wage an uncompromising battle against terrorism and argued that terror was fundamentally a proxy war carried out by hostile regimes. In that same testimony, he explicitly folded Palestinian militancy into that broader architecture by referring to Yasser Arafat’s PLO as terrorist actors. The effect and intuition is in plain sight here. Israel's conflict with Palestinians was not presented as a local national conflict with a colonial history anymore. Rather, it was reframed as one front in the same global war that had just struck New York and Washington. Hence, firstly, through the brand of a terrorist organization, delegitimizing the PLO, the official representative body of the Palestinian people. Secondly, incorporating Israel within the “us” framework.

This repositioning mattered because it gave the Israeli force a presumptive political meaning. If Israel lived on the side of democracy, then its violence could more easily appear as the violence of order, law, and self defense, even when critics raised concerns about occupation or disproportionality. Moreover, Robert Handley’s study of post 9/11 US framing struggles shows that the War on Terror became a key site for debating whether Israel was a strategic ally or liability in that war (Handley 445-461). This is another way of saying that Israel’s meaning was renegotiated inside a newly American security frame rather than primarily inside the older language of occupation and decolonization. Therefore, this frame does not ask “What is Israel doing in Palestine?” but “Where does Israel stand in relation to the West’s war on terror?”

This view was further supported by America. Bush's "new Palestine leadership" speech on June 24, 2002 illustrates the asymmetry that followed ("News Archive - June, 2002"). The speech did acknowledge Palestinian suffering and even said explicitly that it was untenable for Palestinians to live under occupation. It also called for an end to Israeli settlement activity and for withdrawal to pre September 28, 2000 positions as violence subsided. Nonetheless, the decisive burden of legitimacy still fell on Palestinians, despite being uprooted from their homes through occupation. Bush argued that peace required Palestinian leaders "not compromised by Terror" ("News Archive - June, 2002"). He insisted that a Palestinian state could not be created by terror, and made US support for Palestinian statehood contingent on reform, institution building, and a sustained struggle against terrorism. However, they forget that what they label as "terrorism" is actually a resistance movement to the occupation. On that note, Israel's legitimacy, by contrast, was treated as the legitimacy of an already existing state defending its citizens. Palestinian legitimacy appeared rather probationary. Their rights were deemed imaginable, but only after they had first negated the terror identity assigned to them.

The "us" framework is rather fluid. It also includes a category of religion enforced by the religious right in the United States. An Oxford overview of Christian Zionism notes that contemporary Christian Zionists see the establishment of the modern Israeli state in 1948, its territorial expansion in 1967, and its survival thereafter as evidence of God's ongoing special relationship with the Jewish people. Samuel Goldman's God's Country traces how that tradition became deeply embedded in American conservative politics, not merely as a theological doctrine but as a way of imagining national mission and moral alignment (Goldman). Hence, Israel was incorporated into the American conception of "us" from various complex viewpoints. Within the

War on Terror environment, that convergence of theology, nationalism, and security narrative made Israel legible as both biblically favored and civilizationally aligned.

The durability of this alignment became visible again in 2024, when Netanyahu told the US Congress in effect, that Israel's enemies were America's enemies and that Israel's fight was America's fight. The wording within that speech was contemporary without a doubt, but the structure was unmistakably post 9/11. It revived the same moral geography that Bush had made famous in 2001 and that Israeli leaders had helped normalize from the very beginning of the War on Terror.

Palestinians Inside the Category of Them

If Israel was increasingly secured inside the democratic "us", Palestinians were more easily located inside the heinous and suspicious "them". Anna Bernard's influential essay on Palestinian writing after 9/11 captures this shift excellently (Bernard 349). She illustrates that in the wake of the attacks, the dormant figure of the "Palestinian terrorist" was revived for American public discourse (Bernard 349). Bernard's point is crucial because it emphasizes that 9/11 did not invent the trope. Rather, 9/11 reactivated and intensified the trope. The older image of the Palestinian hijacker, bomber, or irrational fanatic, long circulating in Western political culture, suddenly acquired a wider security vocabulary and a new emotional backing. After 9/11, Palestinian militancy could be read less as the violence of a colonized occupied people, regardless of who condemned or defended it, but more as a part of a single transnational pathology called terrorism.

Individuals often underscore the influence vocabulary holds within narratives, especially pertaining to conflicts. Naming practices and vocabulary was central to that recording. Words do

not merely describe events and actors; they construct places, identities, and widespread imaginaries. Given, if one side is habitually and constantly named through terms such as “terror,” “extremism,” “incitement,” and “security threat,” while the other is named through terms such as “democracy,” “defense,” and “peace process,” then the conflict is already morally judged upon and sorted before any legal judgement can be made. Naming therefore, becomes a tool for legitimacy. The issue is not simply whether a particular act is condemned, but whose violence is narratively individualized, historicized, and explained, and whose is collectivized, depoliticized and made emblematic of identity.

Media research supports this broader pattern. Kimberly Powell’s study of US terrorism coverage after 9/11 found that news representations linked Islam to terrorism in strongly disproportionate ways, helping produce a generalized Muslim threat image (Powell). Studies of the Israel Palestine conflict likewise show that representation shifted in more critical directions for Palestinians during the period of the second Intifada and after. For instance, Annelore Deprez and Karin Raeymaeckers found that the portrayal of Palestinian actors in Flemish press coverage moved from a relatively positive view during the first intifada to a more critical portrayal during the second (Deprez and Raeymaeckers 185). Despite that study not being about the United States alone, it captures a wider tendency, which is that the more the conflict was narrated through spectacular violence and terror, the more Palestinians were represented through securitized and criminalized frames.

The consequences on identity were profound. Palestinian claims increasingly had to pass through an evidentiary filter that Israeli claims did not face in the same way. It was not enough for Palestinians to claim nationhood, rights, or representation. They also had to additionally prove they were not what the Western and “us vs them” frame had already suggested they were.

Essentially they had to additionally prove that they were not terrorists, not anti-modern, not irrationally driven by religion, not inherently incapable of democratic self rule. Hence, within that narrative they could only get rights as basic human beings and citizens once narrative rehabilitation was achieved.

This is also where the reduction of Palestinian identity to Islam becomes especially misleading. Palestinians are not a purely Muslim collectivity. Palestinian nationalism transcends beyond religion. Palestinians nationalists have emphasized an Arab identity that cuts across religious divides. For instance, Palestinian Christianity continues to underline that Palestinian Christians remain part of the national fabric even if they are a small minority. Hence, the reduction of Palestinian identity to a Muslim threat therefore performs two distortions at once. It erases intra Palestinian identity and it fuses a national claim with a suspect civilizational identity. Hence, there is asymmetry highlighted within the fact that "Palestinians" by certain groups of people are often questioned as an invented term while "Israeli" is left unmarked. The point is not simply semantic. It is a struggle over who is granted mutual nationhood and who must first prove existence.

Legitimacy, Political Rights, and the Burden of Innocence

The above frames are crucial to this paper's analysis because legitimacy is never truly abstract. In this context, legitimacy to say the least has three dimensions. Firstly, it is crucial to decide whether or not people are seen as a credible carrier of sovereignty. Secondly, whether its violence is interpreted as criminal, political or existential. Third but lastly, whether rights are understood as unconditional or as dependent on previous moral performance. Unfortunately, the War on Terror affected all three, and therefore ultimately affected legitimacy. Moreover, by establishing

Israel within the group of democracies seen as under threat and linking Palestinians closely with terrorism, the public discourse shifted the burden of proof. Israel was usually asked whether its tactics were proportional or wise. On the other hand, Palestinians were more often asked whether they were politically legitimate subjects to even begin with.

Public Opinion data for that matter reveal how deeply that asymmetry had been penetrated into actual reality. A few mere days after 9/11, Gallup found American sympathies running 55% for Israelis and 7% for "Palestinian Arabs" ("Questions and Answers About American Public Opinion"). Moreover, this viewpoint continued when by April 2002, while the second intifada was taking place, Gallup still found that 50% of Americans sympathized more with Israelis and only 15% with Palestinians. Unfortunately, more revealing still, 70% described recent Palestinian violence as terrorism rather than legitimate acts of war, while 53% described recent Israeli violence as legitimate acts of war rather than terrorism. Hence, these concrete and factual evaluations back up the claim that the same arena of violence produced two distinct moral languages; terror for one side, war or self defense for the other.

It is necessary to note at this point of the paper, that the effects did not stop at views of the Middle East. Research on attitudes toward Muslims in the United States shows how the broader War on Terror climate normalized exclusionary policy preferences. Sides and Gross found that stereotypes of Muslims as violent or untrustworthy were linked to support for War on Terror policies (Sides and Gross 583-598). Lajevardi later demonstrated that more negative media portrayals of Muslim Americans deteriorated public attitudes toward them. Survey evidence summarized by the Democracy Fund Voter Study Group found that support for travel restrictions, mosque surveillance, and other anti-Muslim measures rose alongside negative stereotypes of Muslims' cultural fit and supposed sympathy for terrorism. This very domestic

evidence is crucial to this paper's analysis because it demonstrates how the post 9/11 figure of the suspect Muslim subject molded the background conditions under which Palestinians were interpreted abroad. When a population is broadly imagined as culturally suspect, its political rights elsewhere become easier to treat as contingent.

However, the overall situation is not entirely dystopian from all aspects. There are definitely pockets of Utopia that grow through the form of support from the international stage. Specifically, the legal architecture of international rights points in a different direction. An international Court of Justice summary of its July 19 2024 advisory opinion states that the Palestinian people's right to self determination cannot be conditional ("Summary of the Advisory Opinion of 19 July 2024"). The Court further held that Israel's continued presence in the occupied Palestinian territory violates that right. Likewise, a United Nations Human Rights Office summary of the 2022 report by the Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territory centered Palestinian right to political freedom, to control their own land and government, and to decide their future without external domination as one of the main legal and human rights issues in the conflict. Furthermore, in a related 2022 press release, the Rapporteur argued that Palestinian political activity was being suppressed and restricted, and hence there was a pursued attempt at de-Palestinianisation of the occupied territory. de-Palestinianisation refers to the idea that Palestinian culture, identity, political presence, or claims to the land were being weakened and eradicated. Regardless, on whether or not people fully agree with the above findings, one aspect is rather very clear. The War on Terror narrative still made Palestinian rights seem dependent on Palestinians first proving they were morally acceptable, not connected to terrorism, and inherently peaceful. However, international law views self determination

differently. It is treated as an inherent right that people possess automatically. It is not something they must earn or prove they deserve.

This tension helps explain why debates over Palestine so often seem to proceed on two tracks at once. On one track, law speaks the language of peoples, occupation, sovereignty, and rights. On the other hand, politics speaks the language of terror deradicalization, moderation, and security screening. The War on Terror did not eliminate the first track, but it often subordinated it to the second. In practical terms, that meant Palestinians were more likely to be heard as objects of humanitarian concern or security management than as subjects of equal political entitlement. The frame did not simply criminalize militants; it downgraded the legibility of national claims.

Endurance, Countercurrents, and Limits

The argument needs careful qualification. The War on Terror did not invent anti-Palestinian tropes, anti Arab racism, or Orientalist narratives. Many predated 2001 by decades, and Palestinian militancy had long been represented in the West through the imagery of hijacking and terror. Nor should the second intifada be treated as narratively irrelevant; suicide bombings and attacks on civillians had real political effects and furnished powerful material for the new frame. In that sense, the War on Terror worked because it attached itself to older fears and to actual violence rather than fabricating an imaginary enemy from nothing. It intensified, generalized, and moralized existing categories.

Nor was the frame ever total. Even Bush's 2002 speech, despite all its conditions, expressly recognized occupation as untenable and called for a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Public opinion also shifted over time. Gallup's 2021 review showed that sympathy for Palestinians and favorability toward the Palestinian Authority had improved relative to the early

2000s, especially among Democrats and younger adults ("Questions and Answers About American Public Opinion"). That same review found support for an independent Palestinian state at one of its higher recent points, with 52 percent backing statehood in 2021. These shifts matter because they show that the War on Terror frame was influential, not omnipotent. Without a doubt it did structure debate and discourse, but it did not fully determine it.

On that very note, there were also important counter narratives. Palestinian literature, as Bernard argues, pushed back against the invidious stereotype of the "Palestinian terrorist" by restoring social context, biography, and historical injury to subjects that the security frame preferred to flatten (Bernard 349-358). Human rights advocacy, church based Palestinian testimony, and legal scholarship similarly insisted that Palestinian identity could not be reduced to terror and that occupation, statelessness, and unequal rights had to remain analytically central. Even work on Christian Zionism complicates simple assumptions. For instance, the strongest predictors of evangelical support for Israel are not simply biblical proof texts but age, political environment, and socialization, which means they can in principle change.

Nonetheless, the endurance of the frame is difficult to deny. The same binaries that structured the early War on Terror continue to recur whenever Israeli violence is narratively fused with Western self defense and Palestinian violence is narrated primarily as a civilizational threat. Recent scholarship on the afterlives of War on Terror discourse emphasizes that the post 9/11 mode of thinking about security has not simply disappeared; it has become normalized. Netanyahu's 2024 congressional address, with its insistence that Israel's enemies are America's enemies and that Israel's fight is America's fight, showcases exactly how durable that template remains. The historical object may be "post 9/11," but its rhetorical infrastructure is still present.

The main limitation of this essay is hence one of scope rather than argument. The evidence here speaks most directly to US and broader Anglophone or Western elite discourse, because that is the environment in which the War on Terror was most hegemonic and where its categories most clearly shaped the framing of Israel and Palestine. Different regional public, Arab political cultures, and Palestinian internal debates would require separate treatment. However, within the Western arena that has had outsized influence on media narratives, material support and diplomacy. Yet, the conclusion remains concrete. The War on Terror made Israeli legitimacy appear more immediate and Palestinian rights more conditional by narrating the two groups through fundamentally unequal moral categories.

Conclusion

Conclusively, the War on Terror's, "us vs them" narrative reshaped the framing of Israeli and Palestinian identities by supplying a ready made moral map for interpreting conflict. On that map, Israel was increasingly positioned as part of a civilized, democratic, and endangered "us," while Palestinians were more readily imagined as part of a racialized, securitized, and politically suspect "them." This did not erase Palestinian rights, history, or identity. However, it did alter the terms on which they became audible. Israeli violence was more easily legible as self defense; Palestinian violence, and too often Palestinian identity itself, became legible through the language of terror. Israeli legitimacy appeared presumptive. Palestinian legitimacy appeared conditional.

That asymmetry is why the question of political rights cannot be separated from the politics of narrative. Rights are not only adjudicated in courts or negotiated at diplomatic tables. They are also made persuasive, or made to seem implausible through stories about who is

modern, who is dangerous, who belongs to civilization, and who must first prove they do. The War on terror did not settle the legal question of Palestinian rights; institutions such as the International Court of Justice and the UN system continue to affirm the rights of Palestinian self-determination. However, it has powerfully shaped the political and cultural conditions under which those rights are viewed. For that very reason, understanding Israel Palestine after 2001 required more than recounting events. It requires examining how narrative itself distributes humanity, legitimacy, and the right to have rights.

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