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# CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE DYNAMICS OF ISRAEL - PALESTINIAN CONFLICT BASED ON THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

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**Executive Summary:** Numerous perspectives and theories have been put forward to examine, analyse and explain international security problems in general and Israeli- Palestine conflict in particular. The present analysis explored the Israeli-Palestinian conflict via the various theories including Realism theory, Liberalism theory, securitization theory, balance of threat theory, security dilemma theory, deterrence theory and Offense-defence theory. The theories were critically examined in terms of their application to the conceptualization and understanding of the Israeli- Palestine conflict.

**Keywords:** Conflict, International Security, Realism, Liberalism, Securitization, Security Dilemma, deterrence.

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## 1. Introduction

Security and safety have long been a historical phenomenon that has coexisted with humanity, society, and nation-states. The origins of security studies can be traced back to the Cold War era and the significant decolonization that occurred in the latter half of the 20th century. In essence, the conclusion of World War II and the rise of the United States as a global superpower paved the way for the emergence of national and international security concepts. Since then, various internal and international security challenges, such as warfare, terrorism, abductions, cybersecurity, economic security, and human security, have been confronted by countries and security actors. Similarly, frameworks, or ideas for analysing security issues have been proposed over the years. Numerous perspectives and theories have been put forth to examine, research, and analyse security problems in order to gain deeper insights into the management of security at local, international, and collaborative levels. The present analysis aims to explore the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the lens of Realism theory, Liberalism theory and securitization theory, balance of threat theory, security dilemma theory, deterrence theory, Offense-defence theory.

## 2.0 Theories of International Security and Israeli-Palestinian war

### 2.1 Realism theory in the context of Israeli- Palestinian conflict

Realism theory of international security emphasizes the importance of physical security and power for states. It assumes that states prioritize their survival and are willing to compromise other material gains to protect their sense of continuity in the world. Realism views the state as the central actor in international relations and focuses on military threats to security (Guzzini, 2013). The theory argues for the continued relevance of the nation-state in defining security, considering it as the building block of the international system. Realist perspectives diverge from liberal and neoliberal approaches to security, as they prioritize the establishment of secure international regimes and do not necessarily adhere to global rules or democratic reforms. Realism is based on salient elements including anarchy, national interest and military power. Anarchy in international security refers to the absence of a central authority or governing body that can enforce rules and maintain order among states. Israeli-Palestine conflict reflects Anarchy in that the two nations engage in Military tiff with no or minimal interventions from any

quarters Like the UN body. The two states therefore have taken advantage of lack of central governing body to engage in violent conflict between them leading to deaths and destruction of properties. Realism theory is also based on the concept of National interest that refers to the values, ideals, and objectives that a country prioritizes and seeks to protect and advance in its interactions with other nations. The Israeli- Palestine conflict also reflects the concept of national interests associated with realism theory. The conflict between the two states reflects their resolve to protect their national interest in the form of securing their sovereignty among other interests. The national interest of either of the state seems only achievable at the expense of the other hence the protracted conflict between them.

Realism is also based on the concept of military power. Military power refers to the ability of a state to use its armed forces and military resources to achieve its foreign policy goals and influence international politics. Military power is a crucial tool in deterring and resolving armed conflicts, although non-military measures are also important in achieving peace. The Israeli-Palestine conflict depicts the concept and use of military power at its best. The two nations have for a long time been engaged in military war with nations involving their air and ground military artillery against each other. The conflict therefore is fueled further by the presence of military resources on both sides of the states. The theory has however been criticised in the analysis of international security in general and Israeli- Palestine conflict in particular. The theory cannot explain international cooperation, diplomacy and conflict resolution. The conflict between Israel and Palestine have witnessed some form of international cooperation, diplomacy and conflict resolution efforts which the theory fails to capture. The Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) signed in 1993 depicted cooperation, diplomacy and conflict resolution. Theory also ignores global Interdependence by being state centric in its analysis of international relations. The reality is that no state can be alone and that states are linked and depend on each other for their own survival. The conflict between Israel and Palestine has aspect of international community involvement in the form of procurement of Military resources as well as global efforts to resolve the conflict.

### ***2.2 Liberalism theory and in the context of Israeli- Palestinian conflict***

Liberal theory owes its existence to groundbreaking academic works of scholars and philosophers such as Adam Smith, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and François-Marie Voltaire in the 18th and 19th century. The theory has three interlinked principles. The first is that power politics is not the only product of international relations hence questioning warfare associated with it. The theory is also in support of cooperation among states as well as ensuring mutual benefits. Lastly, the theory speaks to the existence of international bodies and non-state actors that can moderate state foreign policy choices (Springer, Birch, & MacLeavy, 2016). The theory informs the state and dynamics of Israeli- Palestine conflict with its key concept cooperation and interdependence. The conflict between Israel and Palestine has witnessed aspects of cooperation and diplomacy in the process of attempting to resolve the protracted conflict. The Oslo agreement plus other efforts have been undertaken to try and resolve the conflict between Israel and Palestine. The conflict also depicts international institutions and organizations with various international organizations such as United Nations being involved in trying to resolve the conflict.

The theory has however been criticised based on some its key elements that does not capture aspects of international security in general and the Israeli- Palestine War in particular. The conflict between Israel and Palestine depicts utter violation of the rule of law and human rights. The recent insurgence of the conflict has already witnessed thousands of deaths of civilian population including women and children. The aspects of utter violation of human rights and rule or law are not captured in the theory that assumes respect of International Human rights. The conflict between Israel and Palestine has also tended to depict weak international organizations. The UN has not played Its role in resolving the conflict between the two nations with the two states always on their own hence resolving to violence and military actions. The concept of international organizations has tended to remain just a concept with minimal action being seen in resolving the conflict that has posited for decades.

### ***2.3 Securitization theory in the context of Israeli- Palestinian conflict***

Securitization theory is an approach within international relations that focuses on the process through which certain issues are constructed and framed as existential security threats, thereby justifying extraordinary measures and actions that go beyond normal political processes. Developed by scholars such as Ole Wæver and the Copenhagen School, role of speech acts, discourse, and the social construction of security issues (Medina, 2023). Securitisation theory explains that national security policy is carefully designated by politicians and elite decision-makers. Central to securitisation theory is showing the rhetorical structure of decision- makers when framing an issue and attempting to convince an audience to lift the issue above politics. Conceptualising securitisation as a speech act is important as it shows that words do not merely describe reality, but constitute reality, which in turn triggers certain responses. An issue becomes securitised when an audience collectively agrees on the nature of the threat and supports taking extraordinary measures. Securitization theory identifies a referent object that is threatened and needs to be protected. A referent object, a central idea in securitisation, is the thing that is threatened and needs to be protected. Securitisation theorists determined five sectors: the economic, the societal, the military, the political and the environmental sector. In each sector, a specific threat is articulated as threatening a referent object.

The military sector is a critical sector among the sectors where a threat and referent object are identified. In the military

sector the referent object remains the state and the threat being any factor within and outside the state that is threatening the wellbeing of the state. In the context of Israeli – Palestinian conflict, the two states view each other as threat to their existence. The Israeli state under the leadership of the prime minister Netanyahu and its security organs view Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as threat to their existence hence the use of force to have full control over the land mass between Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea that is occupied by the two nations. The Palestinian side also view Israeli side as a threat to their existence hence they use all possible military force to stop their expansion. Therefore, the two nations based on securitization theory view each other as a threat their existence hence peaceful coexistence is a mirage rather than reality.

However, securitization theory has been criticised based on its weaknesses in analysing conflict situations such as overemphasis on Speech Acts, elite centric focus and negative security. In the context of Israeli- Palestinian conflict, theory focuses on acts of speech by leaders of the warring states to their citizens telling them of the threat posed to them by the other state. The reality is that the conflict between Israel and Palestine has other facets beyond just speech act. The war has aspects such as historical contexts, geopolitical factors and military power. Such neglected factors also have a critical bearing on the status and dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. Further, the theory tends to focus on the political and elite groups being the only significant actors in the Israeli- Palestinian conflict. The reality is that there are many actors including civil society, grassroots movements, and non-state actors, in influencing security discourses in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Finally, the theory has been criticised for focusing on negative security in terms of protection against threats (i.e., Israel viewing Palestine as an enemy and a threat) rather than positive security in terms of promoting the well-being and development of the two states together with their citizens.

#### ***2.4 Balance of threat theory in the context of Israeli- Palestinian conflict***

Balance of threat theory is a perspective in the field of international relations that aims to elucidate the emergence of alliances through an examination of the perceived threats confronted by states. Balance of threat theory is a theoretical framework that examines how states perceive and respond to threats in international relations (Lobato, 2022). It suggests that states assess the seriousness of a threat based on factors such as aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions. This theory posits that states align themselves with other nations not solely based on the distribution of power, but also on the character and origin of perceived threats. Coined by Stephen M. Walt during the 1980s, balance of threat theory builds upon the tenets of realism, while introducing a more intricate comprehension of threat perception. It contends that states forge alliances contingent upon their interpretations of external threats, which encompass not only military might, but also encompass economic, political, and ideological dimensions. Moreover, the theory classifies threats into categories such as military, economic, political, and cultural, thereby necessitating the formation of alliances.

Balance of threat theory can be adopted to examine the Israeli- Palestinian conflict. The two nations view each other as a threat hence they have formed alliance with other like-minded nations to help them handle the threats. The Israel in an effort not to be alienated by the Arab nations in its conflict with Palestine, went ahead and forged relations with a number of Arab nations. Israel maintains full diplomatic relations with two of its Arab neighbours, Egypt and Jordan, after signing peace treaties in 1979 and 1994 respectively. In 2020, Israel signed agreements establishing diplomatic relations with four Arab League countries, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Sudan and Morocco. Having such alliance on Israel side reduces the threat of the Palestine especially when they form alliance with other Arab nations to support them in the conflict. The Palestine side has also formed alliances with Arab nations such as Jordan, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Qatar among others.

Even though balance of threat theory can explain the reason why the Israeli- Palestine conflict has seen formation of alliances, the theory has been critiqued on a number of its basic principles including; quantification of threat, Subjectivity of threat Perception and Static Nature of threat perception. Theory assumes that threats can be objectively and consistently quantified by a state to warrant formation of alliances. The reality is that threats are complex and come from various dimensions including military, economic, political, and cultural. It is thus not simple for the Israel or Palestine to identify all possible threats coming from each other together with alliance partners. Further, the threat is often not of static nature as postulated in theory. The reality is that there are many confounding and changing factors that form part of threat in the Israeli-Palestine conflict. For instance, Israel may have entered into relations with some Arab nations recognising them as friendly to their course. However, change in leadership in those nations may result to change of hearts and so do the threat they pose that may have not been in existence before.

#### ***2.5 Security dilemma theory in the context of Israeli- Palestinian conflict***

The theory of the security dilemma is a concept within the realm of international relations that pertains to a circumstance in which actions conducted by one sovereign state with the intention of bolstering its security are interpreted as menacing by other states. Consequently, this gives rise to a sequence of competitive and frequently unproductive security measures. The security dilemma serves as an essential element of realist thought and accentuates the difficulties that states encounter within a chaotic international system wherein there is an absence of a central authority to ensure security. The theory, affiliated with

intellectuals such as Kenneth Waltz, is grounded upon fundamental notions such as the anarchic international system, defensive measures, arms races, lack of communication and trust, and the spiral model (Ameyaw-Brobbe, 2023). The theory explains that due to anarchic nature of the world, states seek military power to protect themselves against external aggression via acquisition of higher and better military weapons. The other states also react to a state acquisition of military power by also engaging in purchase of military equipment leading to arms race. Such race coupled with suspicion may result to military confrontation hence war and protracted conflicts.

The theory can be adopted in examining the nature and status of Israeli-Palestine conflict. The conflict between the two nations depicts conventional and unconventional arms races in the Middle East. Given that the international arena is viewed as Anarchic where each state is on its own, every state including Israel and Palestine have taken it upon themselves to ensure their security through acquisition of military power via advanced military equipment's. The Arab countries including Palestine are worried that Israel will annex the occupied territories and view with suspicion any weapons acquisitions by Israel. Tel Aviv is perceived as constantly increasing its margin of military superiority so as to be able to retain those lands forcibly, make them an integral part of Israel, and frustrate efforts to achieve the Arab goal of establishing Palestine state. Meanwhile Israeli anxieties revolve around the belief that any arms procurements by the confrontation countries such as Palestine and its sympathisers are intended for use against Israel either to retake the occupied territories or ultimately to destroy the Israeli state. Thus, Arab-Israeli conflict depicts the necessary to procure additional arms for purposes of deterrence or to create a sense of security. Regardless of the announced reasons for such acquisitions, the assumption usually is that, in view of the mistrust on both sides, the arms will be used in an offensive manner. Accordingly, foreign policy decisions of the two states reflect such suspicions, and each side continues to arm with ever more sophisticated weaponry.

The security dilemma theory in explaining conflict in general and conflict situation between Israel and Palestine in particular has not been immune to criticisms. The theory has been critiqued on its basic concepts around homogeneous state behaviour, neglect of non-military factors and role of misperceptions. Theory assumes that a state has homogenous behaviour towards other states. In the context of Israeli-Palestine conflict, it can be construed that both Israel and Palestine have homogenous behaviour towards each other and that there does not exist groups within each state with competing and different interests in the conflict. The reality is that within Palestine and Israel and more of Palestine, there are different groupings within the state that have differing interests in the affairs of the state and those interests mold the state behaviour. The Palestine side Fatah-ruled Palestinian National Authority and the Hamas Government in Gaza. These groups have differing interests that is reflected in the state behaviour of Palestine. The theory has also been criticised for relying on role of misperceptions and mistrust and military behaviour to explain arms competition, rivalry and conflict in Israel and Palestine. The reality is that there exist multiplicity of factors including nonmilitary factors such as historical, religious angles to Israeli- Palestinian conflict.

### ***2.6 Deterrence theory in the context of Israeli- Palestinian conflict***

Deterrence theory is a concept in international relations that focuses on preventing undesirable actions or behaviour by influencing the decisions of potential adversaries. The central idea is to discourage an actor from taking a particular course of action by convincing them that the costs or risks associated with that action outweigh the benefits. Deterrence theory has been a central concept in shaping military and strategic policies, especially during the Cold War. Deterrence can be applied to various domains, including military, political, and economic realms. The key elements of deterrence theory include threat, capability and escalation (Sörenson, 2022). The deterrence theory may be adopted to explain and analyse the nature and dynamics of Israeli-Palestine conflict. The Israel and Palestine have often adopted deterrence via threat issued to each other. The leadership of the two states have always resorted to verbal threats to each other via the media before actual military confrontation happens. The threat is always issued by either the Israel side or Palestine side to discourage the other party not to think of attacking it. Another form of deterrence often adopted by the two warring sides is capability deterrence via arms race. Acquisition of more military power by the two states has often been used to send a signal to the other party that if they do not heed the verbal threats, then there is going to be consequences. Possession of more military powers by the two states is supposed to act as mutual deterrence of the two nations from attacking each other because there are consequences.

The final deterrence adopted by Palestine and Israel is deterrence by punishment. In the ongoing tiff between the two sides, Palestine first attacked the Israel side injuring, killing and abducting scores of Israeli citizens. The Israeli side reacted through military retaliation via aerial attacks followed by ground attacks. The initial attack and the counter attacks were meant to teach each side a lesson not to attack again in the near future. However, the use of punishment by each side has escalated to full military war and unprecedented security situation with scores dead, properties destroyed among other consequences.

The deterrence theory explanatory power over international conflict and security situation especially in the context of Israeli – Palestine conflict has been criticised based on its inherent weaknesses such as escalation risk, shift in power dynamics, credibility of threat among others. The adoption of deterrent theory in explaining security and conflict situation is based on assumption that deterrence such as threats and punishment will lead to the states avoiding future confrontations. However, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict context, such deterrence has not helped in reducing conflicts between the two states. In fact, if anything, it has resulted to escalated situations with thousands of lives lost and property destroyed on both sides of the warring states. Further, the states have tended to ignore threats issued by each other given that the threats are not often credible

hence threats are not working due to credibility of such threats. The theory does not recognise that there can be shift in power dynamics among warring states like Israel and Palestine.

### ***2.7 Offense-defense theory and in the context of Israeli- Palestinian conflict***

Offense-defense theory is a concept within the realm of international relations that scrutinizes the equilibrium between offensive and defensive military capabilities and the subsequent ramifications for global security. This theory delves into the impact of the relative advantages of offense and defense on the conduct of states, the probability of conflict, and the stability of international systems. Offense-defense theory is grounded in notions such as military capability, strategic interaction, polarity, and the security dilemma. Offense-defense theory provides a framework for understanding the strategic choices of states in an international system (Sneddon, 2023). The theory asserts that there are situations when a state should adopt offensive strategies while there are times it should adopt defensive strategies as each strategy has its own weaknesses and strengths. In the theory can be applied to explain the conflict situation between Israel and Palestine. There are times when the warring nations have adopted defensive and offensive strategies. For instance, Israel acquired a defensive military equipment capable of intercepting missiles launched in Palestine soils towards to Israeli side. The Israeli military strength is the Iron Dome air defense system which has been widely touted as the world's best defense against missiles and rockets even though on Oct. 7, 2023, Israel was caught off guard by a very large-scale missile attack by the Gaza-based Palestinian militant group Hamas. The use of Israel's Iron Dome air defense system is a defensive military strategy in itself.

However, the two nations have also adopted offensive strategies against each other. In the recent ongoing escalation, the Palestine side launched an offensive strategy by attacking Israeli towns and cities killing and injuring scores in the street. The Israeli retaliated via offensive strategy where aerial attacks and ground troops have been deployed against the Palestinian Hamas. The initial offensive strike from Palestine and the retaliatory offensive strike from Israel has since escalated into full blown military actions between the two states with calls for cease fire having not yielded much. The offense-defense strategies being applied by the two states relies on their military capability and use of technology to adopt defensive strategy when they need to and launch offensive strategy when it becomes necessary. The decisions for the two warring states to adopt offensive and defence military strategies depends on strategic interaction where military leaders gauge the security situation based on perceived advantages of offense or defense strategies. Further, theory asserts that the presence of polarity (Multipolarity and Bipolarity) can influence the stability of the system. In a bipolar system, where power is concentrated between two major states or two major alliances like the present US -China global powers, stability may be easier to maintain because of a clearer balance between offense and defense strategies.

However, theory has been criticized by security scholars and practitioners terming it lacking in critical aspects such as focusing solely on military actors, assumption of rational actors, dynamic nature of conflict among others. The theory especially in explaining the Israeli-Palestina conflict tends to focus on military actors and leaving out the nonmilitary factors. Such focus tends to be simplistic as the nonmilitary actors and factors such as political, religious and cultural that also influences the behaviours of the states. Further, theory has been challenged based on its preoccupation with rational actor assumptions. The theory assumes that the Palestine and Israeli sides are rational in evaluating when to adopt offensive and when to adopt defensive strategies in the conflict between them. For instance, in the ongoing tiff between the two states, if both states were rational, they would have not adopted offensive strategies that have resulted to more damage on both sides.

## **3.0 Conclusion**

Numerous perspectives and theories have been put forward to examine, analyse and explain international security problems in general and Israeli- Palestine conflict in particular. The present analysis explored the Israeli-Palestinian conflict via the various theories including Realism theory, Liberalism theory, securitization theory, balance of threat theory, security dilemma theory, deterrence theory and Offense-defence theory.

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