Ceasefire Part 1 – Understanding Threat Perception

Sanna Stark (CF4), SWE Armed Forces (CSAG/CCJ5)

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Key Points

- The paper's main objective is to identify some of the root causes for the lack of progress in the negotiations concerning a ceasefire in the ongoing war between Hamas and Israel.
- Analyzing the belligerents' threat perceptions creates a space to explore a solution by understanding the current conditions and historical background of the conflict. Without having a deep understanding as to *why* the different actors behave in a certain way, the *how* to move towards a ceasefire and ultimately a long-term solution may remain obscured.
- The competition between identity narratives contributes to a zero-sum game where each side perceives the other's gain as its own loss - a dynamic which makes compromise extremely challenging and would undermine core aspirations.
- Given the importance that both belligerents place on the territorial rights to the holy land and its religious meaning, there is a powerful reinforcement between threat perceptions from ideational and material force.
- Hamas' autonomy in making operational decisions concerning a ceasefire together with Israel's willingness to de-escalate may be decisive factors for the prospects of a ceasefire, which is why conflict ripeness and exit strategies will be addressed in the next part of the series.
- The current situation might be the new normal since threat perception give little room for compromise.

Introduction

Despite many months of pressure from the international community regarding a ceasefire in Gaza, the level of hostilities and distrust remains high. It is therefore pertinent to keep in mind both the strategic objectives of sustainable governance solutions for the Palestinian territories, and the urgent initial steps needed to relieve the civilian population from harm. A ceasefire is one of the most important elements for a credible starting point for future agreements on conflict resolution. Without a ceasefire, humanitarian aid cannot flow sufficiently into Gaza and the possibility for negotiating a sustainable peace settlement and rebuilding infrastructure are miniscule. The current situation also contributes to an unsustainable security situation for both the Palestinian as well as the Israeli people. This CSAG Strategy Paper is the first in a series of papers that will shed light on what pre-conditions affects the possibility for a ceasefire, such as threat perception, conflict ripeness, timing, and mediation / negotiation strategy.

Since October 7 last year when Hamas carried out the heinous surprise attack against Israel killing over 1200 Israeli citizens and foreign nationals, and taking over 250 hostages, it has been evident that balanced measures for conflict

resolution are lacking.[1] The response by the State of Israel that followed the attacks together with the ongoing war, continuous threat against Israel, and extreme suffering of the Palestinian civilians in Gaza, underlines this absolutely. Due to the sense of urgency that the humanitarian situation, security situation, and the risk for regional spillover / escalation create, the importance of the international community's active engagement in breaking the cycle of violence cannot be over-stated.

The main objective of the paper is to identify some of the root causes for the lack of progress in the negotiations concerning a ceasefire through the lens of threat perception. The paper addresses the belligerents' (Hamas and Israel) different threat perceptions from the perspective of both material and ideational force, and how these elements reinforce one another. A fundamental understanding of the belligerents' threat perceptions can possibly enable more targeted and efficient negotiations as well as address the international community's role in mediation efforts. The main question being posed is therefore:

- What are the belligerents' main threat perceptions and how are these affecting the prospects for a ceasefire?

Definitions

Threat perception

Threat perception can be understood as the cognitive ability of anticipating danger. Threat perception, therefore, may or may not be directly related to assessments of an opponent's actual capabilities and intention of carrying out a threat.

> "Threat perception is the decisive intervening variable between action and reaction in international crisis. When threat is not perceived, even in the face of objective evidence, there can be no mobilization of defensive resources. Hence phenomenon of surprise. Conversely, threat may be perceived, and countermeasures taken, even when the opponent has no malicious intent."[2]

Ceasefire

As there is no universally agreed upon definition of ceasefire, it is important to define it for the objectives of this paper. According to the UN Ceasefire Guidance from 2022 a ceasefire agreement can have varying degrees of structure and include both short-term and long-term steps for conflict resolution.[3] Due to the complexities that a long-term peace solution in the larger context of the Israel-Palestine conflict would impose on a ceasefire agreement if one relied on a broader definition, CSAG has settled on a less extensive definition of ceasefire at this stage. This to support a step-by-step approach of conflict resolution as well as allowing the analysis to focus on the most pertinent actors in the current negotiations, namely an armed group, Hamas, and the State of Israel.

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[1] Jeremy M. Sharp and Jim Zanotti, "Israel and Hamas Conflict in Brief: Overview, U.S. Policy, and Options for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, Updated June 3, 2024, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47828 (accessed June 17, 2024).

[2] Raymond Cohen, "Threat Perception in International Crisis," *Political Science Quarterly* 93 no. 1 (1978): 93, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2149052.

[3] *United* Nations, "UN Ceasefire Guidance 2022," 2022, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/Ceasefire-Guidance-2022-Chapter-1.pdf (accessed June 10, 2024).

For a broader analysis of threat perception in relation to a more comprehensive definition of ceasefire, it would have to include several other actors such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian Authorities (PA). The assessment is that these aspects must be dealt with at a later stage to reach step 3 and 4 in the figure below. For the paper's objectives CSAG has decided on the following definition for now:

"An agreement to stop the hostilities between the identified combatants for a sufficient period of time to allow a halt to civilians harm, an increased flow of humanitarian aid, containment of regional spillover effects / escalation, and the belligerents to take steps toward long-term conflict resolution." - CSAG, 2024
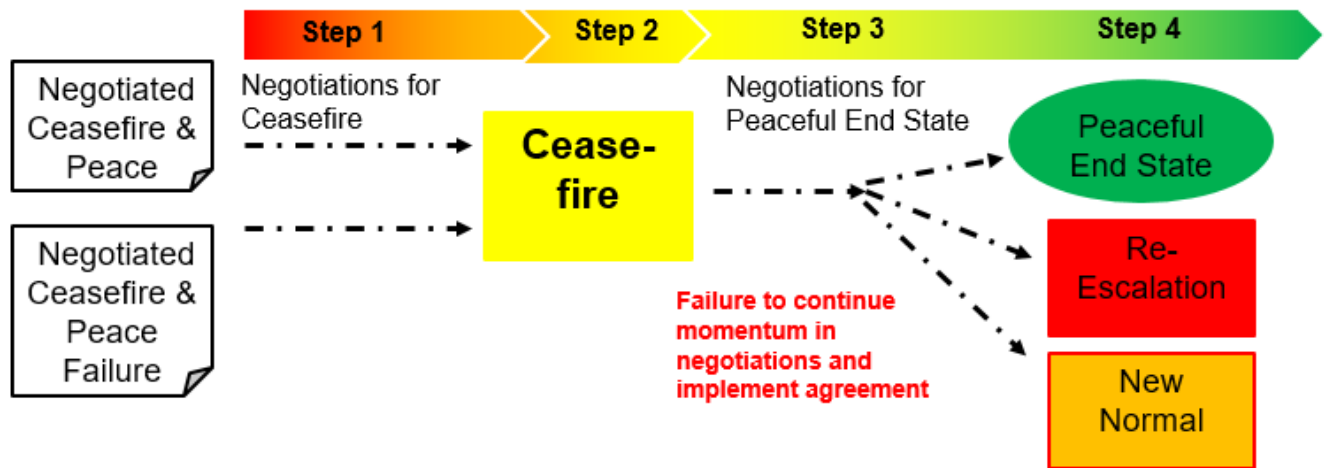

Figure 1. CSAG Visualization of the road to comprehensive conflict resolution

Context and Security Environment

The ongoing war between Hamas and Israel is inextricably linked to a larger context of complex conflict dynamics and history surrounding what is commonly referred to as the "Question of Palestine." The points below are merely intended to address some of the most pertinent dimensions of the conflict that affects the analysis and is not to be viewed as a comprehensive attempt to describe the long history of hostilities. Overall, there is a complex environment where both internal and external dimensions interact and affects threat perception as well as ongoing ceasefire negotiations.

- The Israel-Palestine conflict carries decades of tensions centered around territory, borders, security, issues of self-determination, repression of human rights, and religion. Aspects that have been feeding into Hamas' and Israel's threat perception and conflict dynamics over time. The regional power dynamics and regional actors in the Middle East have a significant bearing on the prospects for resolving the conflict short-term and long-term.[4]

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[4] Mohammed Sayed, Rene Berendsen, Hubert Mróz, "Panacea For Gaza," *CSAG US CENTCOM*, April 1, 2024, https://nesa-center.org/csag-strategy-paper-panacea-for-gaza/ (accessed April 24, 2024).

- Potential spoilers benefit from diminishing the possibility of a ceasefire and a resolution of the broader conflict. Iran uses their proxies to increase their power across the region and decrease Western influence. Russia also vies for increased influence in the region while positioning itself against the interests of the West. Hezbollah adds to tensions by using the conflict as a pretext to seek advantage in their historic conflict with Israel. The Houthis are also using the conflict to improve their standing and prosecute attacks on Israel. China, not necessarily a spoiler in the conflict right now, can also be assumed to have interest for undermining the U.S. position in the region and has now presented itself on the world stage as a potential mediator.[5]
- Other regional players are concerned with horizontal escalation, as well as eroding domestic support for their leadership. Gulf partners must balance support to the U.S. activity in the region designed to neutralize opportunities for escalation against negative responses from their own populations for supporting U.S. operations and actions due to its strong affiliation with Israel.
- The constant developments in the operational environment in the region affects the strategic context of the conflict. Israeli ground operations in Gaza, the deteriorating security situation in the Red Sea with Houthi aggression, the latest Iranian-Israeli confrontation, and the ongoing escalation between Israel and Hezbollah all enhances the complexity of the conflict. It is crucial to contain the spillover effects to decrease the risk of broader regional escalation.
- The ongoing Israeli military operations in the South of Gaza and in Gaza City, amid international protests, will most likely have severe implications for the future of the negotiations for furthering stability but also for the relationship with Egypt and other regional players.[6]

The Negotiations

Despite pressure from the UN, regional stake holders and major global powers such as the U.S. there is still no substantial progress in sight in the discussions between Hamas and Israel.[7] The UN Security Council agreed on a resolution for a ceasefire in June, which was initially received with careful optimism by the international community.[8] Hope for an end to the hostilities rose, but negotiations have since stalled. Meanwhile, risk of escalation and regional spillover continue alongside further deterioration of the already catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza. The current deadlock in the talks being brokered by U.S., Egypt and Qatar are related to several key points:

- Hamas is demanding a permanent ceasefire while Israel is only willing to agree to a temporary cessation of the hostilities in Gaza since they do not assess that the conditions and reassurance for ending the war is in place.[9]

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[5] Amy Hawkins, "Palestinian factions including Hamas agree to form unity government," *The Guardian*, July 23, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/23/palestinian-factions-accord-china-talks (accessed July 23, 2024).

[6] The Associated Press, "Why Israel is so determined to launch an offensive in Rafah. And why so many oppose it," April 30, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/rafah-offensive-israel-netanyahu-hamas-palestinians-014b2d850bbe28897b624bc5e5378320 (accessed May 2, 2024); David Gritten and Rushdi Abualouf, "Hamas says Israel's Gaza actions jeopardize ceasefire talks," *BBC*, July 9, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c6p2v89n6yvo (accessed July 9, 2024).

[7] Matthew Lee, Sam Mednick, and Samy Magdy, "Israel-Hamas war: Blinken presses Hamas to seal Gaza cease-fire deal," *The Associated Press,* May 1, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-news-05-01-2024-7cbf7c696989cdc3a22383c823fb2e0e (accessed May 6, 2024).

[8] *United Nations*, "Adopting Resolution 2735 (2024) with 14 Votes in Favour, Russian Federation Abstaining, Security Council Welcomes New Gaza Ceasefire Proposal, Urges Full Implementation," June 10, 2024, https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15723.doc.htm (accessed June 13, 2024).

[9] Nadeen Ebrahim, "Hamas has offered a ceasefire deal. Here's why that won't bring an immediate end to the war in Gaza," *CNN*, May 8, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/06/middleeast/hamas-ceasefire-offer-gaza-war-mime-intl/index.html (accessed May 16, 2024).

- There are discrepancies as to what the belligerents will accept in terms of the release of hostages and prisoners.
- Hamas wants a complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza which the Israeli government has stated is not an option until Hamas military and governing capabilities in the Strip has been completely destroyed.[10]
- Recently, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have made comments that indicates a growing divide between the military and the government on the outlook for a ceasefire.[11]

Theoretical foundation – Understanding Threat Perception from Ideational and Material Force

The assumption in this CSAG Strategy Paper is that threat perceptions significantly affect the possibilities for successful negotiation and mediation of a ceasefire. The analysis of the belligerents' respective threat perceptions is informed and inspired by a theoretical framework developed by Dr. May Darwich. The framework enables an analysis of threat perception derived from both ideational and material force and the interconnectedness between these two categories of perceived threats, as depicted in *Figure 2* below.
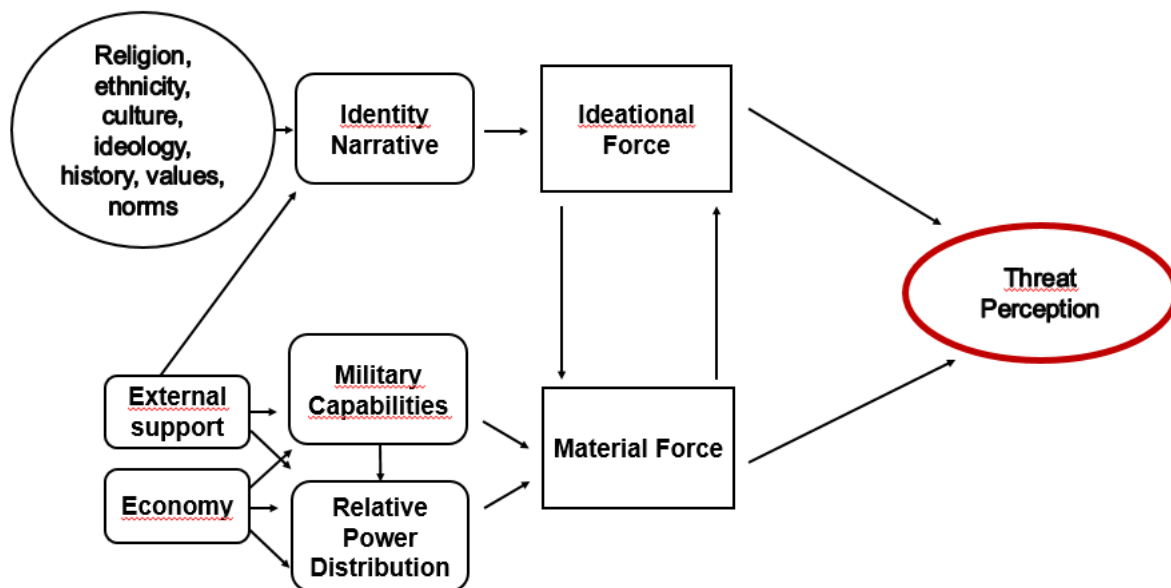

Figure 2 – Visualization of Threat Perception, Material and Ideational Force, and Influential Factors

One of the main assumptions in Darwich's work is that states and regimes seek to secure both their ontological and physical security. The reasoning behind the duality of this concept is that neither ideational or material explanations on their own are sufficient. Ideational force is connected to the struggle for ontological security, which ultimately is a cognitive or psychological sense of the continuation of being someone or something (security-as-being). Material

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[10] Samy Magdy and Drew Callister, "Here's what's on the table for Israel and Hamas in the latest cease-fire plan," *The Associated Press*, May 8, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-gaza-ceasefire-negotiations-7cec005ccd59dbd817ef9614a8611ca4 (accessed May 28, 2024).

[11] Lazar Berman, "Report says IDF brass backing ceasefire even if it leaves Hamas in power: PM: Won't happen," *The Times of Israel*, July 2, 2024, https://www.timesofisrael.com/report-says-idf-brass-backing-truce-even-if-it-leaves-hamas-in-power-pm-wont-happen/ (accessed July 8, 2024).

force is connected to the struggle for physical security (security-as-survival). Material and ideational dimensions of threat perception is assumed to be in constant interaction. In the pursuit of security, it can also be assumed that actors then shape policies in line with their perception of threat.[12]

In similarity with Darwich previous work, the struggle for ontological security and threat perceptions regarding ideational force is mainly addressed through the focus on identity and identity narratives in this paper. To uphold a self-identity, a narrative about who one is and why is of importance. Identity narratives can often include factors such as historical analogies, religious and ethnic grievances, ideology, culture, norms, and values. They are also a way of positioning the *self* in relation to *the other.* It is practically a story about who one is and why, and ultimately what is worth fighting for. This is why threat perception in relation to ideational factors will be centered around identity narratives in the following analysis.[13] Identity narratives can be projected on to others and the support and help to uphold the narrative is important for its endurance and therefore also ontological security.

Physical security is more easily explained and essentially revolves around threats to the survival of the state or regime and "freedom from harm or danger" (*security-as-survival*).[14] Naturally, threat perception from material force is therefore related to aspects than can impose a danger on one's physical survival, such as an opponent's military capabilities and the relative power distribution between two belligerent which are examined in this analysis.[15]

Method

To conduct the analysis of threat perceptions related to material and ideational force as well as their reinforcement of one another, questions have been operationalized from Darwich 's framework. The structure for the analysis is derived from the method of focused structured comparison, which enables the extraction of relevant data from empirical material from both primary and secondary sources.[16]

Main question:

- What are the belligerents' main threat perceptions and how are these affecting the prospects for a ceasefire?

Analysis – Threat perception from Ideational Force

1. **Identity Narratives**
   a.) Hamas constantly emphasizes their view of themselves as resistance fighters against the occupation of historical Palestinian land. They reject the legitimacy of Israel's existence, considering it to be a colonial implant with no right to any part of the territory. As a part of their narrative, they highlight that the Palestinians inhabited the land for centuries until the Zionists expelled the Palestinian people and stole their land.

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[12] May Darwich, "Ideational and Material Forces in Threat Perception Saudi and Syrian Choices in Middle East Wars," *The University of Edinburgh* (2015):54-60, http://hdl.handle.net/1842/19478.
[13] Ibid., 63.
[14] Ibid., 50.
[15] Ibid., 60.
[16] Andrew Bennett and Alexander George, *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*, (Cambridge: *The MIT Press* 2005), 67-87.

In the first version of "The Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement" from 1988, Hamas clearly states the ideological and religious motivations, and visions. Islam is referred to as the "program" for the movement, and the charter contains extreme antisemitic language and refers to paragraphs in the Hadiths about killing Jews. It describes the movement's connection to The Muslim Brotherhood and clearly states that Hamas is a distinguished Palestinian movement. Hence, connecting the Palestinians and Palestine to the allegiance with Allah and life within Islam. For them, the resistance is closely related with the oppression of Muslims and the struggle against what is described as the "Zionist invaders" from the year of 1939. The charter put Jihad in the center of how to continue their struggle for the liberation of Palestinians. They also mention their view on PLO and states that "The day the Palestinian Liberation Organization adopts Islam as its way of life, we will become its soldiers, and fuel for its fire that will burn the enemies".[17] A clear sign of disdain for more moderate   resistance.

Hamas does not promote a two-state solution. In 2017, the charter was updated to contain fewer graphic displays of antisemitism and mentions of connections to the Muslim Brotherhood were removed. While an attempt to come across as less extreme, they restated that their territorial claim refers to all land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. The new charter also puts a particular focus on Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital and the Al-Aqsa Mosque as important parts for not only Palestinian identity but the whole Arab and Muslim world. It also emphasized the right of return for displaced Palestinians and refugees to the whole of Palestine (regardless of when and what land has been occupied).[18] For these reasons the normalization process between Israel and other Arab countries, and particularly the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia considering their leadership role in the Arab world, has likely contributed to Hamas' threat perception in relation to ideational force.

b.) The Israeli identity narrative is largely centered around the notion of Zionism and the advocacy as well as security for a Jewish nation state in the "land of Israel". The land is considered the holy birthplace of the Jewish people, and their religious and historical connections to the land dating back thousands of years are strongly connected to the continuous emphasis on territorial rights.[19] Though not all Jewish people support the Zionist narrative emphasized by Israel, a majority see that a nation state is pertinent for the Jewish identity. The state of Israel is thus to many seen as integral to Jewish identity, visions, security and safety after many years of persecution – something which is considered threatened by those who promote a Palestinian state within Israel.[20]

The current government in Israel has publicly rejected a potential Palestinian state, claiming it would be a counterproductive for their national security.[21] As a part of their identity narrative, Israel therefore frame their military actions and security measures as necessary for the protection of the Jewish state against existential threats, including terrorism and hostility from predominantly Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah.

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[17] *Yale Law School – The Avalon Project*, "Hamas Covenent 1988," https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp (accessed June 9, 2024).

[18] *Middle East Eye*, "Hamas in 2017: The document in full," May 2, 2017, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hamas-2017-document-full (accessed June 13, 2024).

[19] Paul Scham, "Modern Jewish History: Traditional Narratives of Israeli and Palestinian History," *Jewish Virtual Library*, 2005, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/traditional-narratives-of-israeli-and-palestinian-history (accessed June 19, 2024).

[20] Alexandra Herzog, "It must be restated: Israel is Central to Judaism and Jewish Identity," American Jewish Committee, February 9, 2024, https://www.ajc.org/news/it-must-be-restated-israel-is-central-to-judaism-and-jewish-identity (accessed May 16, 2024).

[21] Mark Lowen, "Netanyahu publicly rejects US push for Palestinian state," *BBC*, January 19, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68025945 (accessed June 5, 2024).

The narrative also has held an aspect of reconciliation, where the Israeli perspective is that they have been seeking peace with their Arab and Muslim neighbors, which to some extent has been realized through the peace treaty with Egypt but also in the normalization process with other Arab countries.[22] Israel also describes itself as the sole democratic state in the Middle East and a part of Israel's identity narrative is the focus on the view of themselves as righteous, by allegedly holding themselves to a higher moral standard than their competitors. This is often emphasized by government representatives in relation to the conduct of warfare, for example by describing the IDF as the "most moral military in the world."[23] Some members of the current government have also used dehumanizing language against Palestinian civilians, who are often accused of sheltering Hamas.

2. **Competition between Identity Narratives**

a.) Hamas and Israel both construct narratives that reinforce national identities and legitimize their claims over the contested territory as well as how they currently conduct their warfare. Both belligerents utilize their respective narratives to frame themselves as victims of the other and protectors of their peoples while demonizing their opponent. Previously experienced trauma is used to elevate the competition between these different narratives, both to gain domestic as well as external support.

b.) One visible example of the competition over narratives regards the "status" of Jerusalem. The city is a powerful symbol for both Israelis and Palestinians from all religious strands. For the Muslims, Jerusalem is home to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, considered the third holiest site in Islam after Mecca and Medina. For Hamas (and many Palestinians and Muslims), it represents resistance against Israeli occupation and a focal point of Palestinian nationalism. Israel considers Jerusalem as its undivided capital, a claim not recognized by many countries.[24] While on the other, Hamas seeks East Jerusalem and the Old City as the capital of a future separate Palestinian state.[25] For Israel, Jerusalem represents the religious, historical, and eternal capital of the Jewish people. Tensions in Jerusalem, particularly around the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif, often serve as flashpoints for wider violence. The significance of Jerusalem in the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict cannot be underestimated, as it stems from its deep religious, cultural, and political importance.

c.) An even more powerful example of the war on narratives is the antisemitism / genocide dichotomy that has been particularly present during the past few months. Benjamin Netanyahu has on many occasions since the war started used the Israeli identity narrative to frame criticism of Israeli measures as antisemite, including that of the International Criminal Court (ICC). He's drawing directly on periods of persecution suffered by the Jewish people, particularly the holocaust. October 2023 marks the worst single attack on Jews since the Holocaust. In doing so, any type of suggestion that Israeli military measures are not proportional can be viewed as an infringement on the inalienable right for Israel to defend the Jewish people exposed to an existential threat. In this case, from Hamas.[26] On the other hand, Hamas is framing Israeli warfare and the vast number of civilian casualties as an intentional genocide shielded by Israel's claims of self-defense.

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[22] Johan Berggren, *Den perfekta konflikten*, (Historiska Media 2021), 35.

[23] Benjamin Netanyahu, "The UN put itself on history's blacklist…,"*X*, June 7, 2024, https://x.com/netanyahu (accessed June 19, 2024).

[24] Schmuel Berkowitz, "The Status of Jerusalem in International and Israeli Law," *Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs*, https://jcpa.org/the-status-of-jerusalem-in-international-and-israeli-law/ (accessed June 16, 2024).

[25] *Britannica*, "Hamas," Updated July 23, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hamas (accessed July 23, 2024).

[26] Tia Goldenberg, "Netanyahu frequently makes claims of antisemitism. Critics say he's deflecting from his own problems," *Associated Press*, Updated May 29, 2024,https://apnews.com/article/israel-netanyahu-antisemitism-campus-05ebd71bec931a62f58e7d5f9e93fa19 (accessed June 19, 2024).

d.) Settlements are another point where the constant competition is visible. The recent decisions by the Netanyahu government to approve settlements on the West Bank is fueling threat perception and hatred.[27]

3. Support for Identity Narratives

a.) As the number of civilian casualties in Gaza has increased with time, Hamas' narrative implying genocide, seems to grow stronger despite Hamas' own blatant disregard of Palestinian lives. The extreme civilian suffering and the optics of the warfare is useful for Hamas. The information environment with an increasing amount of fake news and deceptive narratives, serves both sides, but long-term the Israeli government is likely to draw the short straw regarding threat perception from ideational force. Regardless of intentions, the Israeli conduct that reinforces Hamas' narrative will contribute to increased radicalization and likely cause an entire new generation of hate against Israel. Not only will this strengthen Hamas' narrative against Israel, but it also will serve to strengthen its standing in competition with the PLO / PA amongst Palestinians. Despite the human suffering Hamas still enjoys a fair amount of support in Gaza but the support for them is also growing on the West Bank.[28] However, the many Palestinians that do not support Hamas remain under their extremist rule in Gaza which makes it hard to form any type of real opposition.

b.) The global Muslim solidarity movements and the Palestinian diaspora highlight Palestinian suffering not only in relation to the ongoing war but also by using historical analogies of how the conflict has developed over time. Some movements portray Hamas warfare as justified resistance against Israeli policy, occupation, and actions, while others support the Palestinian struggle but reject Hamas as a legitimate representative of them.

c.) Israel's domestic support for their identity narrative is in the balance. The most fundamental part of the narrative was reinforced by Hamas on 7 October 2023, with a clear and present threat to the Jewish people. Over the course of the ensuing conflict, the situation has shifted. The Israeli people are growing tired of the war, they harbor worries about further escalation and are disappointed with the government and IDF for not being able to bring back the hostages despite several months of intensive warfare in Gaza.[29]

d.) The U.S. and many of its allies have declared Hamas a terrorist organization and frame Israel's military actions as self-defense against Hamas' indiscriminate attacks on Israeli civilians. External pro-Israel narratives portray Israel as a Western-aligned democracy under existential threat from Hamas and regional extremists, evoking the need to ensure Israel's security. Much like domestic support, as the conflict has progressed, international support for Israel's narrative has waned. This is also related to the lack of long-term strategy, as it is unclear to the international community if Netanyahu wants peace at this stage. With considerable populations of Palestinian diaspora, many European states have amped up their support for the Palestinian people and support for a Palestinian state. Indeed, three European states have recognized the Palestinian territories as a state. The international community has the challenge of striking a balance in messaging when pressuring Israel to adhere to international law in their pursuit of security while not coming across as supportive of Hamas.

e.) Iran and their proxies utilize Hamas' identity narrative for their own vested interest of achieving regional dominance / influence. China remained somewhat neutral but has leaned more toward supporting the Palestinian people than Israeli military measures after October 2023. Notably they recently hosted Hamas

[27] Tia Goldenberg, "Israel approves plans for nearly 5,300 new homes in West Bank settlements," Associated Press, July 4, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-hamas-war-news-07-04-2024-972cc86ab554103bba449dc117bee0d1(accessed July 11, 2024).

[28] Lucy Williamson, "Support for Hamas grows strong on the West Bank," *BBC News*, December 13, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67695861 (accessed June 19, 2024).

[29] Joshua Berlinger, Lauren Iszo and Tamar Michaelis, "Israel rocketed by largest protests since war began as Netanyahu faces growing pressure," *CNN*, Updated April 1, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/01/middleeast/israel-protests-netanyahu-intl/index.html (accessed June 19, 2024).

and Fatah leadership for a reconciliation meeting in Beijing.[30] Russia is attempting a balancing act, trying to maintain good relations with both sides, and positing themselves as a possible mediator.

4. **Summary Threat Perception from Ideational Force**
Threat perception from ideational force is largely connected to the two different identity narratives centered around historical and contemporary grievances surrounding a few main issues. Right of land, religion and security. While Israel overall has an identity narrative of "Victimhood, Trauma and Survival", following the atrocities committed to the Jewish population over the years, Hamas' narrative is centered around "Victimhood and Displacement" which is connected to the oppression of Palestinians and Muslims. There is an additional dimension of hatred of the "other" which manifests as blatant antisemitism.

In additional to the physical struggle, the war is very much one of competing narratives and perception at the strategic level. The cognitive and psychological dimension of the warfare is deeply rooted in competing identity narratives that fuel the ongoing tensions and violence. It is clear when exploring these identity narratives, neither recognizes the legitimacy of the other which fixes threat perceptions from ideational force on both sides over time and perpetuates a cycle of violence.

Analysis – Threat perception from Material Force

1. **Military Capabilities**
a.) Hamas armed wing Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades has existed since 1991. It roughly consists of 30-40 000 fighters, though it is hard to say how many of these they have lost since October 2023. Initially, Hamas used suicide bombings as a part of their *modus* but have grown their military capabilities to an extent where this is no longer frequently used although terror tactics are still employed. Their military arsenal predominantly consists of rockets, including long-range missiles and drones but Hamas officials has also indicated the existence of other types of materiel, such as bombs and mortars. The network of tunnels that Hamas has built up over the years, enabled by the exploitation of civilian infrastructure, are key. They keep Hamas personnel and their activities protected from Israeli air capabilities. They use the tunnels in Gaza as strongholds for storing materiel, training of soldiers and for command-and-control functions. The tunnels also contribute to a larger capability to enforce an element of surprise and the use of asymmetric tactics on the IDF.[31]
b.) The IDF consists of approximately 170,000 active-duty troops and close to 500,000 additional reserve troops. Roughly 300,000 of the reserves have been called up since the start of the war. In 2023 the IDF had a budget of almost USD 24 billion, giving it an investment superiority over other regional powers. Israel has a vast range of sophisticated military capabilities, but they rely heavily on their missile defense capabilities (Iron Dome) and air superiority.[32] In terms of other capabilities the arsenal is estimated to include over 2000 tanks, which together with a vast amount of other equipment and resources such as artillery, an advanced intelligence service, and special forces capabilities makes them more than fit for conducting combined arms ground operations. Israel also has the benefit of a strong defense industry. Their operational challenges are not necessarily the lack of capabilities, although they are heavily reliant on a reservist army. This enables the IDF to generate mass but inevitably impacts upon expertise and discipline. More importantly, the inherent difficulties of urban warfare, the exceptionally dense population of Gaza strip and Hamas' deft use of asymmetric tactics honed over years of experience and external training and support pose a significant

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[30] Hawkins, "Palestinian factions including Hamas agree to form unity government."

[31] *Axios*, "What to know about Hamas Military Capabilities," October 23, 2023, https://www.axios.com/2023/10/21/palestine-hamas-military-power (accessed June 17, 2024).

[32] *Axios*, "What to know about Israels Military Strength," October 21, 2023, https://www.axios.com/2023/10/21/israel-military-capabilities-explained (accessed June 17, 2024).

challenge to the IDF, irrespective of materiel strengths.[33] This even more so if the IDF is not willing to put enough boots on the ground to hold and build for the long-term, for which there seems to be little appetite. This is unsurprising given the increased risk of casualties to the IDF this approach brings.

2. **External Support**
a.) As a non-state actor Hamas relies on a diverse network of external backers, with varying agendas. Some supporters are interested in supporting the extreme Islamist agenda, while others are interested in supporting Hamas for their own strategic gains such as destroying the state of Israel or undermining Western influence in the region. Often these objectives align. Their main supporters are Iran which supplies Hamas with finances, weapons, ammunition, and military training that bolster Hamas's military capabilities against Israel.[34] Within the Iranian Threat Network (ITN), the now self-styled "Axis of Resistance", Hezbollah is an important actor which actively supports Hamas on different levels.[35] Though Hamas has been raising funds in some of the Arabian Gulf countries and through other foreign sources and networks in countries such as Türkiye, Algeria, Sudan over the years, their military capabilities would likely be significantly diminished without Iran.[36]
b.) Israel, as a state actor, has a historically robust economy and though they do not rely on external financial and military support to the same extent as Hamas, Israel receives significant military aid from the US, which plays a vital role in supporting Israel's defense capabilities. This aid includes advanced weaponry, missile defense systems which contribute to the Iron Dome, and intelligence cooperation.[37]

3. **Relative Power Distribution**
a.) Hamas relies on well-developed asymmetric warfare tactics, including guerrilla warfare and rocket attacks which neutralizes Israels considerable conventional comparative advantage and requires Israel to adapt the employment of their superior conventional capabilities.
b.) Israel controls a significant portion of the territory in the region, including borders, airspace, and maritime boundaries. This control gives Israel an advantage in terms of security and operational positioning, while Hamas' use of civilian infrastructure gives them an advantage of protection and surprise.
c.) Another important aspect that works to Hamas' advantage and elevates Israel's threat perception of the material force is their very nature: a state is obligated to respect international law; a terrorist armed group seeks advantage by not doing so.

4. **Summary Threat Perception from Material force**
    In general, threat perception from material force seems to be more dynamic in comparison with ideational force and is also driven by the developments in the operational environment**,** not only in the immediate

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[33] Bilal Y. Saab, "Israel has the capacity to significantly damage Hamas with a ground offence. But politics will restrain it throughout," *Chatham House*, October 17, 2023, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/10/israel-has-capacity-significantly-damage-hamas-ground-offensive-politics-will-restrain-it (accessed June 17, 2024).

[34] Kali Robinson, "What is Hamas?," *Council on Foreign Relations*, Updated April 18, 2024, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-hamas (accessed June 17, 2024).

[35] Kali Robinson and Will Merrow, "Iran's Regional Armed Network," *Council on Foreign Relations*, Updated April 15, 2024, https://www.cfr.org/article/irans-regional-armed-network (accessed June 18, 2024).

[36] *Congressional Research Service*, "Hamas: Background, Current status, and U.S. Policy," Updated June 14, 2024, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12549 (accessed June 27, 2024).

[37] Patricia Zengerle, "US Military support for Israel: What does it provide?," *Reuters,* April 8, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/what-military-support-does-us-provide-israel-2024-04-08/ (accessed June 27, 2024).

area but also in the broader region. The ongoing warfare is to a large part characterized by asymmetry. While over-matched by Israel's well equipped all arms conventional force, Hamas relies on the asymmetry of specialized guerilla warfare.

Public support for the use of material force is part of threat perception. Public support serves as a legitimacy foundation for the continued use of force, and it is crucial for continued recruitment into the Armed Forces, currently a big discussion in Israel. There are vast differences in the type of external support received by Israel and Hamas, predominantly due to their different characters. The external support received shapes the warfare and the dynamics of the confrontations to a large degree and increases threat perception from material force not least for Israel.

Analysis - Reinforcement of Threat Perception between Ideational and Material force

Given the importance that both belligerents place on the territorial rights to the holy land, both for their physical and ontological security, there is a powerful reinforcement between threat perceptions from ideational and material force. For example, Israel considers threats to their identity to be directly linked with the physical threat, a function of their history and reinforced on 7 October 2023. Hamas completely motivates and justifies the use of force with defending Palestinian and Muslim identity. This results in a situation where all military actions against the other is placed in the ideational context which then reinforces the threat to security and makes both belligerents feel the need to enhance their material capabilities. The perfect conditions for escalation.

Conclusions

Analyzing the belligerents' threat perceptions creates a space to explore a solution by understanding the current conditions and historical background of the conflict. Without having a deep understanding as to *why* the different actors behave in a certain way, the *how* to move towards a ceasefire and ultimately a long-term solution may remain obscured. Overall, threat perception in relation to ideational force is fixed at a high level, which Hamas extremist ideational visions and the hardline approach of the current Israeli government reinforces.

The competition between identity narratives contributes to a zero-sum game where each side perceives the other's gain as its own loss - a dynamic which makes compromise extremely challenging and undermines core aspirations. Threat perception in relation to material force is more dynamic and dependent on the operational environment as well as external factors.

Key takeaways

1. The constant demonization and separation from the identity of the other is not only a result of previous trauma but is likely connected to the more cynical interest of staying in power through maintaining public support by invoking more fear for the other. This will adversely impact upon the prospects for negotiation of a ceasefire. To decrease threat perception from ideational force, the rhetoric in the internal and external support expressed for them would have to shift in a less demonizing direction. This would reduce the acute

threat to the belligerent's security-as-being, and their respective identity narratives. There are major challenges to what the international community can do to encourage changed threat perceptions from ideational force. Demonization has been reinforced over the years to the point where it has been institutionalized. Additionally, the extremist character of Hamas and the threat they constitute to both Israel and the Jewish people makes it difficult for the international community to express any acceptance of them as a legitimate actor. Finally, the current Israeli governments hardline approach and recent trauma creates a deadlock in their rhetoric.

2. An identity narrative is dependent on support from an audience. Given the recent trauma, compromises in relation to the conflict as whole but also the negotiations of a ceasefire would risk decrease legitimacy and support from their respective audiences.

3. The consequences of how Israel has conducted its warfare against Hamas has likely led to the point where Hamas is gaining more support for their narrative than before so there is little incentive for them to compromise. Further, Israeli conduct is hurting their own narrative and risks further alienation from the international community.

4. Israels threat perception regarding material force is heavily affected by external influence. It has increased with time due to other external actors' actions, such as Iran and its proxies, who have more military capability to realize an existential threat towards the State of Israel than Hamas. It can be assumed that Hamas' military capabilities have received a large dent. That dent would be detrimental for Hamas' existence if it were not for the external support they receive. These external actors share Hamas' vision of annihilating Israel and sustaining Israeli threat perception in relation to material force, which would not otherwise be the case.

5. Hamas' threat perception from material force is likely at its peak due to significant damage inflicted to their organization, infrastructure, and capabilities over the past months of intense warfare. This could be positive for the prospects of a ceasefire, since exhaustion can force windows for ceasing hostilities. Timing of negotiations will be more thoroughly addressed in the next paper in the series. The big question is however related to autonomy from their backers to make operational decisions and agreements in favor of a ceasefire. For Hamas, choosing de-escalatory measures may make them lose the external support and lead to an even larger threat to their continued existence.

6. Hardline measures against the Palestinian people invoked by the Israeli government will keep Hamas gaining recruitment ground.

7. Despite that the relative conventional military power advantage Israel enjoys, intelligence failures combined with Hamas' skilled use of asymmetric warfare has a leveling effect on Israel's self-confidence and superiority, fueling threat perception from material force.

8. The reinforcement between ideational and material factors may very well be the determinate variable for a ceasefire. Right now, both belligerents are exposed to a situation where altering their strategic and operational objectives is perceived as a defeat and surrendering on their ideational objectives. Hamas views any concession to Israel as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause and their hardline interpretation of Islam. Israel sees Hamas' refusal to recognize its right to exist as the very definition of an existential threat. It feeds Israel's identity narrative of the Jewish people's eternally threatened existence, which in turn is a key justification for the receipt of vital support from the West and the US.

9. The lack of a long-term vision that ensures both belligerents' continued existence causes a Catch 22. If there is no plan in place for "the day after" a ceasefire, re-escalation is likely. And if there is a plan for "the day after" that neither party finds acceptable included in the deal, a ceasefire will likely not happen. Neither Israel nor the international community is willing to promote any solution for "the day after" that includes Hamas or gives it a role. Hence, the incentive for Hamas to accept a ceasefire deal including a governance solution for Gaza is non-existent; to do so would be acceptance of its own demise. Without a clear vision, accumulating support from the international community becomes difficult, given the risk to personnel and the financial investment required.

10. A perpetuation of violence might be the new normal since the established threat perception gives little room for compromise. That may indicate that there will be no steps taken towards peace as long as there is no larger shift in the security paradigm. However, the international community and actors with influence over the belligerents need to continue the in-depth exploration of how the *status quo* can be altered to break the cycle of violence.

    Despite the bleak outlook, what can be done to support more favorable conditions to make the belligerents come to the table and agree to a ceasefire:

    - The mediator of the negotiations for a ceasefire should be an actor which does not impose a furthered increase to the belligerents' threat perceptions and is accepted by both sides. While an actor with complete neutrality but with enough influence will be hard to come by, the international community should strive for coming up with the least implicated mediator in relation to ideational and material support for either side.
    - Both parties need to have at least one major "win" to not lose face in relation to their identity narrative and supporting audiences. Actors with influence over the belligerents should use their leverage to put pressure on each side to accept this win for "the other" to increase prospects for a ceasefire. Right now, the most feasible win that could contribute to a changed dynamic would be a hostage / prisoner swap.
    - For the conflict, influential state actors and organizations within the international community must have an awareness of the belligerents' possible exit points / strategies to ensure a push at the right time and utilize these potential windows for a ceasefire.
    - The influence and success in negotiations, together with the ability to implement any measures for stability, is dependent on the acceptance and support from the Israeli and Palestinian people. The Israeli and the Palestinian people are those in power when it comes to support for hardline measures. They need to see that there are options for them in terms of leaders to support that encourage a secure and prosperous environment for both peoples. Without the peoples support there can be no viable break of the cycle of violence or sustainable dismantling of support for Hamas, which is crucial not only for the security of Israel but also for future of the Palestinian people.
    - Credible security forces accepted by both sides needs to be prepared for deployment to ensure implementation of the ceasefire. The preparation for this deployment needs to happen simultaneously with negotiations so there is no deterioration in the security environment once a ceasefire is in place.
    - The U.S. with allies and partners needs to effectively deter spoilers with the influence to sabotage negotiations and an agreement, such as Iran and major ITN actors. A comprehensive proactive methodology and a more agile deterrence strategy might be needed which has been addressed in the CSAG: s Strategy Paper from July 8 on U.S.-Iran deterrence dynamics.[38]

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[38] Mohammed Sayed, Rene Berendsen, Hubert Mróz, "Deterring the "Exquisite Diplomat": Unpacking the Complexities of U.S-Iran Deterrence Dynamics," *CSAG US CENTCOM*, July 8, 2024, https://nesa-center.org/deterring-the-exquisite-diplomat-unpacking-the-complexities-of-u-s-iran-deterrence-dynamics/ (accessed July 15, 2024).