

Modelling Motivations in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict with Frame Systems

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I have designed a set of frame systems to model group motivations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the attached diagrams, circles represent frames and borderless text represents individual slots. Lines between frames indicate AKO (inheritance) relations. Default slot values are described in the text.

Consider the provocation frame, a type of action. I posit that there are several different types of provocation frames: in one version, the actor slot defaults to “someone like me” while the objective morality slot defaults to true. In another version, the actor slot defaults to “someone like my enemy” while the objective morality slot defaults to false. Because different groups can interpret the same event by matching it to different frames depending on how the situation matches default values, the choice of default values effectively encodes group bias in this frame system. This differential in how different groups view the same event feeds back on itself leading to escalating cycles of attack and reprisal in which all parties feel they need to continually retaliate.

Properly removed from the situation, we can acknowledge that Israeli snipers killing Palestinian children are committing an immoral act, just as Palestinian bombers killing Israeli children are. Yet many people in the conflict, while retaining the ability to make these distinctions logically, are unable to generate an emotional response to atrocities committed by in group members. We thus recognize the distinction between objective and subjective morality: whereas objective morality can be decided based solely on the facts, subjective morality is a complex conditional evaluation. For example, the subjective morality field of an action may be constrained to only become true any two of the following are true: the objective morality field is true, the act is committed by “someone like me”, or the provoking act is judged as subjectively immoral.

The blurring of personal boundaries implicit in a slot constraint of “someone like me” is vital to the functioning of this frame system, and for any system purporting to model the observed dynamics. Group identities serve as a surrogate for the self. Thus, every slight and injury to any group member becomes a personal offense or threat. Combining notions of leads to complex assessments of individual versus collective responsibility: when a good guy does something bad, is it because they are either individually insane or because the other side “made” them do it. To admit that an in group member committed an atrocity becomes tantamount to admitting complicity in the atrocity – cognitive dissonance renders any such admission impossible.

In the context of the larger story however, slot defaults assume values imposed by the overarching narrative within which people recognize themselves. Consider the second figure for one description of a larger narrative frame that constrains default slot values for frames used on to reason about much shorter term and more immediate issues. People tend to view their own national epics in terms of a struggle. Even when maintaining overwhelming military superiority, they

will often frame their national understanding around a “David versus Goliath” story in which the current favorite public enemy plays the role of murderous brute, and current popular heroes and cowards in positions of power vie to fill the default values of slots like weak king and hero. Thus, conservative Israelis may look upon Sharon as the folk hero rallying to save them from a murderous Arafat while a pathetic and impotent Ehud Barak looks on. Conversely, Palestinians may conceive of Hamas bravely defending them against incredible odds in a battle against Sharon while the weak and impotent Arafat looks on.

As another example, consider how the “Weakened from Within” frame serves as an agent of radicalization in individuals. For example, Israeli hawks may use this frame to conceptualize doves as fifth columnists bent on destroying their society through some tragic flaw. Likewise, Palestinian moderates may conceive of radical Islamic groups as playing into Israeli hands by responding to deliberate provocation and thereby justifying increased violence against Palestinians. In this scenario, moderate Palestinians see their country men’s zeal used against them to the benefit of their opponents. By deligitimizing alternate perspectives, the WFW frame further polarizes everyone and inhibits moderation and compromise.

The relationship between “Weakened from Within” and other classes is complex; simple inheritance is too inflexible to describe my intent. WFW is a kind of struggle, but it can also be thought of as a flavor of struggle, meaning that a frame can be both WFW and another subclass of struggle. The OOP concept of Mixin classes probably comes closest to expressing this relationship. A similar situation holds true for response and provocation: every provocation is an action and some provocations are in response to other acts.

In and of themselves, the results of reasoning in these frames would not be blunders, but the unwillingness to look beyond them constitutes an enormous blunder, effectively locking participants in an unending cycle of violence.