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Between war and faith: just war theory and the dispute over legitimacy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Entre a guerra e a fé: a teoria da guerra justa e a disputa por legitimidade no conflito Israel-Palestina

Entre la guerra y la fe: la teoría de la guerra justa y la disputa por la legitimidad en el conflicto israelí-palestino

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Abstract:
This work investigates the concept of Just War from the Jewish and Islamic interpretations of the notion, analyzing how these conceptions influence the political practices of actors within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To this end, it presents a brief review of the classical formulation of just war and examines how Judaism and Islam developed their own interpretations regarding the legitimacy of the use of force. The research adopts the Theory of Constructivism as its theoretical framework, highlighting the role of ideas, identities, and norms in the social construction of international reality. By intertwining religion, ethics, and International Relations theory, the study seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of the persistence of violence and the difficulties in building peace in one of the most emblematic conflicts of the contemporary world. As for methodology, the one adopted is bibliographic and qualitative in nature, based on the critical examination of classical and contemporary works, as well as on interpretations by scholars concerning the region, political theory, and the religions involved.

Keywords:
Just war. Judaism. Islam. Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Constructivist theory.

Resumo:
Este trabalho investiga o conceito de Guerra Justa a partir da interpretação judaica e islâmica sobre tal conceito, analisando como essas concepções influenciam nas práticas políticas dos atores no contexto do conflito entre Israel e Palestina. Para isso, apresenta-se uma breve revisão da formulação clássica da Guerra Justa, e examina-se como o judaísmo e o islamismo desenvolveram interpretações próprias sobre a legitimidade do uso da força. A pesquisa utiliza a Teoria do Construtivismo como referencial teórico, destacando o papel das ideias, identidades e normas na construção social da realidade internacional. Ao entrelaçar religião, ética e teoria das Relações Internacionais, o estudo busca contribuir para uma compreensão mais ampla da persistência da violência e das dificuldades da construção da paz em um dos conflitos mais emblemáticos do mundo contemporâneo. Quanto à metodologia adotada, foi dada preferência a revisão bibliográfica e um estudo qualitativo, baseado no exame crítico de obras clássicas e contemporâneas, bem como em interpretações de estudiosos acerca da região, da teoria política e das religiões envolvidas.

Palavras-chave:
Guerra justa. Judaísmo. Islamismo. Conflito Israel-Palestina. Teoria construtivista.

Resumen:
Este trabajo investiga el concepto de Guerra Justa a partir de las interpretaciones judía e islámica de dicho concepto, analizando cómo estas concepciones influyen en las prácticas políticas de los actores en el contexto del conflicto entre Israel y Palestina. Para ello, presenta

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una breve revisión de la formulación clásica de la Guerra Justa y examina cómo el judaísmo y el islam desarrollaron interpretaciones propias sobre la legitimidad del uso de la fuerza. La investigación utiliza la Teoría del Constructivismo como marco teórico, destacando el papel de las ideas, las identidades y las normas en la construcción social de la realidad internacional. Al entrelazar religión, ética y teoría de las Relaciones Internacionales, el estudio busca contribuir a una comprensión más amplia de la persistencia de la violencia y de las dificultades para construir la paz en uno de los conflictos más emblemáticos del mundo contemporáneo. En cuanto a la metodología, se optó por una revisión bibliográfica y un estudio cualitativo, basados en el examen crítico de obras clásicas y contemporáneas, así como en las interpretaciones de estudiosos sobre la región, la teoría política y las religiones implicadas.

Palabras clave:
Guerra justa. Judaísmo. Islam. Conflicto israelí-palestino. Teoría constructivista.

Introduction

The tension between Israel and Palestine constitutes one of the most complex phenomena and also one of the most persistent conflicts in International Relations. Far from being merely a territorial dispute, as it is commonly presented, this conflict is rooted in identity-related and religious factors and also carries the weight of questions concerning the existence of a people, which clearly gives the issue a unique density. Furthermore, the region, considered sacred by the three major monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—bears not only religious and spiritual meanings, but also historical narratives and memories of events experienced by both peoples. These have been mobilized to support claims of political and territorial legitimacy. It is precisely this intertwining of faith, identity, and politics that gives the conflict its singular dimension and therefore justifies the importance of conducting an in-depth study of it.

In this context, the concept of Just War emerges. It dates back to classical Greco-Roman thought and was extensively developed within medieval Christianity, especially by Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, theologians who are now saints of the Catholic Church (Walzer, 2003). An analysis of this theory shows that it introduced concepts that transformed views of conflict by proposing ethical and legal criteria for assessing when war may be considered legitimate, as well as rules for its conduct. Just War Theory thus sought to answer a key question in the study of conflicts: under what conditions can recourse to armed violence be considered morally acceptable?

Although it originated in the West, this concern is not exclusive to it. Judaism and Islam, each with its own particularities, developed their own reflections on the legitimacy of combat,

the defense of the people or community, and the limitation of violence, often linking them to historical experiences and to interpretations of sacred texts in light of those experiences.

This study aims to analyze conceptions of Just War within Judaism and Islam and, on that basis, discuss how they relate to the conflict between Israel and Palestine. The discussion is not limited to a historical description or a simple religious interpretation; rather, it seeks to understand how these traditions shape perceptions of the legitimacy of the use of force, underpin political decisions, and affect societies and International Relations.

To conduct this analysis, the study adopts the Constructivist perspective in International Relations. Unlike approaches that privilege factors such as states' military power or institutional structure, Constructivist Theory emphasizes the role of ideas, norms, and identities in constructing the reality in which we live. From this perspective, Just War is understood not merely as an abstract and timeless category, but as a social construction that acquires specific meanings in different cultural and historical contexts. Jewish and Islamic notions concerning the legitimacy of conflicts are therefore viewed not only as religious doctrines, but as active elements in the practices and perceptions of actors in the International System.

Methodologically, this is a qualitative literature-review study based on the critical analysis of classical and contemporary works on Just War theory, Jewish tradition, Islamic tradition, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and Constructivist Theory, as well as on scholars' interpretations of the region, political theory, and the religions involved. In addition, artificial intelligence was used ethically as an auxiliary instrument in organizing ideas, supporting bibliographic research, and reviewing the text, without compromising the study's critical analysis or authorial character. The study followed ABNT standards for formatting.

The study is organized into five topics, in addition to this introduction and the bibliographic references. The first topic presents Just War Theory in its classical formulation. The second provides historical context and examines the development of the conflict between Israel and Palestine since 1948. The third introduces the constructivist perspective as the theoretical framework for the analysis. The fourth addresses conceptions of Just War in Judaism and Islam, with specific subsections for each tradition. Finally, the fifth topic presents the conclusion, reflecting on the effects of these normative and identity traditions on the persistence of violence and on the challenges of building peace.

The study therefore seeks to contribute to a broader and more critical understanding of the dynamics that sustain the conflict between Israel and Palestine, showing how beliefs, identities, and moral values can directly influence political decisions and strategies of war and peace. By analyzing conceptions of Just War from Jewish and Islamic perspectives, it seeks to

demonstrate that these traditions not only reflect religious principles but also constitute fundamental elements in shaping the perceptions of legitimacy and justice that guide the actors involved. Ultimately, this study promotes an interdisciplinary reflection on the ethical limits of the use of force and on the possibilities for dialogue and coexistence in one of the most emblematic conflicts in contemporary International Relations.

Just war theory

Reflection on the legitimacy of wars dates back to Greco-Roman philosophy, when thinkers sought to establish ethical and legal parameters for the deliberate use of force. One of the first thinkers to address the subject was Cicero, whose work On Duties presents a Stoic view of natural law. According to his writings, war could be waged only for a just cause and had to remain subordinate to the public interest and, above all, to the defense of justice; the use of military action solely out of ambition was strongly condemned. An essential link was thus established between war and the restoration or maintenance of order (Cícero, 1999). This classical conception of war as an instrument subordinate to peace profoundly influenced the Christian thought that later emerged.

With the advent of Christianity, reflection on Just War acquired a new framework, as the theory entered a theological perspective. In The City of God, Saint Augustine developed one of the first systematic frameworks on the subject. In a historical period marked by the decline of the Roman Empire and growing violence, Augustine viewed war through a much more religious lens, believing it to be an inevitable consequence of human sin while maintaining that it could be morally legitimate if guided by just principles. For him, war was a necessary instrument for restoring peace and order; in other words, peace must be the aim of war, and it fell to the ruler, as a direct representative of God, to conduct it justly (Agostinho, 1999).

A more complete systematization of the concept of Just War later appeared in the Summa Theologiae, in which Saint Thomas Aquinas organized the criteria for a morally acceptable war around three pillars: legitimate authority, just cause, and right intention. According to the philosopher, only rulers whose authority is conferred for the common good are entitled to declare war. It must be stressed, however, that war may occur only in response to an injustice or aggression and must be waged with the intention of promoting peace—that is, as an instrument for achieving it (Aquino, 2002).

In the modern period, the framework of the Just War concept underwent another transition, leaving the theological sphere and adopting a secular perspective. Hugo Grotius,

considered one of the founders of international law, introduced an innovation in On the Law of War and Peace by offering a legal treatment of war grounded in reason and natural law and moving away from theories tied to Christian theology. Grotius argued that the “law of nations” (jus gentium) imposes limits on war, which can be just only in cases of self-defense or reparation for harm. He inaugurated a universalist view according to which nations are bound by common rules even in times of conflict. This secularization of thought on Just War contributed to the construction of the modern system of sovereign states and to the first international codes of conduct in wartime (Grotius, 2005).

In the contemporary era, the concept of Just War was revitalized through new perspectives, especially in response to the chaos experienced by the world in the twentieth century. In Just and Unjust Wars, Michael Walzer revisited the classical principles and distinguished jus ad bellum (criteria for initiating a war) from jus in bello (criteria for conducting a war). Walzer argued that even in an anarchic international system, universal moral principles tend to create barriers to armed violence. He criticized both absolute pacifism and political realism, defending an essential role for morality in conflicts. Humanitarian intervention, for example, may constitute a just war when its purpose is to protect vulnerable innocent people from genocide (Walzer, 2003).

The evolution of the concept of Just War thus reveals a dynamic tradition that follows historical, political, and legal transformations. Regardless of the thinker, war is viewed neither as a natural state nor as a good belonging to society, but as a morally regulated phenomenon when conditioned by the pursuit of justice and peace. Over the centuries, this tradition provided the foundations for the development of international humanitarian law and continues to guide debates on international security (Walzer, 2003).

The Israel-Palestine conflict: context and developments after 1948

The conflict between Israel and Palestine may be classified as one of the most complex and prolonged in contemporary human history, marked by territorial disputes, religious rivalries, and deeply rooted identity issues. It can be argued, however, that the conflict entered a new and decisive phase with the official creation of the State of Israel soon after the end of the Second World War. To understand its configuration after 1948, it is necessary to outline a historical panorama extending back to the origins of the region and to the development over the centuries of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities established there (Armstrong, 2011).

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The region known as Palestine has always occupied a strategic place in human history, not only because of its geographic position at the intersection of Africa and Asia, but also because of its cultural, economic, and religious value. Located in a corridor between great empires and the trade routes of the Fertile Crescent, Palestine has over time been a territory marked by conquests, migrations, and exchanges that shaped its plural identity (Said, 2012).

In this context, Jerusalem emerges as a symbolic and spiritual center that transcends its status as an urban nucleus. More than a city, it has been understood as a meeting place between the human and the divine, acquiring a sacred dimension that made it indispensable to the identity formation of the three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Jerusalem therefore cannot be reduced to a mere disputed territory; it must be understood as a living metaphor for the spiritual and political aspirations of distinct peoples, which explains its continuing centrality in historical clashes (Armstrong, 2011).

In antiquity, the region was disputed and successively dominated by great empires—including the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman empires—all fully aware of its strategic importance. The destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE had already represented a rupture in Jewish religious experience, but it was the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, under Roman rule, that produced an enduring trauma: the Jewish diaspora. This event redefined the identity of the Jewish people, shifting the centrality of worship to the Torah and communal life while reinforcing the memory of Jerusalem as a lost but constantly evoked spiritual center (Armstrong, 2011).

With Islamic expansion in the seventh century, Jerusalem acquired a new dimension of sacredness. Islamic tradition associates the city with the “Night Journey and Ascension” (Isra and Mi’raj), during which the Prophet Muhammad is believed to have ascended to heaven from the Dome of the Rock. This belief established Jerusalem as Islam’s third holiest city, after Mecca and Medina, giving it a prominent place in the formation of the Muslim religious imagination. This value was not limited to the spiritual sphere; it also became part of a political and symbolic dispute over possession of sacred spaces that crossed centuries of conflict (Said, 2007).

During the medieval period, the Crusades (eleventh to thirteenth centuries) further increased the city’s centrality, particularly within Latin Christianity. The crusading movement sought not only to recover the holy places, but also forged a vision of Jerusalem as the spiritual heart of Christendom. During that period, Jerusalem came to occupy the center of the European imagination as a symbol of the victory of faith over the “infidels.” The city therefore became a

stage for violence, pilgrimage, and ideological dispute, reinforcing its condition as both a sacred and politically contested space (Armstrong, 2011).

With the rise of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century, Palestine remained under its control for approximately four centuries. This period was marked by relative stability. Under the Ottoman administrative structure, religious communities enjoyed a degree of autonomy through the system known as the millet, which allowed the different religious groups living there—especially Jews and Muslims—to organize their religious practices and community life. Although inequalities inherent to the Empire's Islamic hierarchy remained, this arrangement notably ensured peaceful coexistence between Jews and Arabs in the region, in contrast to the more intense clashes of earlier periods (Armstrong, 2011). The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War, however, brought a crucial geopolitical turning point that is essential to understanding the contemporary conflict. In 1920, Palestine came under British control by decision of the League of Nations, the predecessor of the United Nations (UN), creating a new geopolitical context (Said, 2007).

The British Mandate coincided with the growth of the Zionist movement, which had already demonstrated strength at the end of the nineteenth century and advocated the creation of a homeland—a Jewish nation-state. The Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which the British government expressed support for creating such a homeland in Palestine, further encouraged large-scale Jewish immigration back to the lands of the Middle East. As the number of Jewish immigrants increased, tensions with the Palestinian Arab population became inevitable, since the latter viewed the movement as a threat to their historical presence and consequently to their possession of the land (Morris, 2009).

After the end of the Second World War and its well-known events, the UN presented the Partition Plan for Palestine through Resolution 181. It provided for the creation of two states, one Jewish and one Arab, and the internationalization of Jerusalem, thereby seeking to enable peaceful coexistence between the two peoples. While the Zionist leadership accepted the plan, Arab countries and Palestinian leaders rejected it, arguing that it was unjust and disproportionately favored the Jews. Following Israel's declaration of independence on May 14, 1948, the neighboring Arab states—Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq—invaded the new state, beginning the First Arab-Israeli War of 1948-1949 (Morris, 2009).

The war ended in an Israeli victory and consolidated its independence. As a consequence, however, the State of Israel expanded its territory far beyond the borders envisaged by the UN, further worsening relations between the peoples of the region. Palestinians remember the episode as the Nakba ("catastrophe"), associated with the exodus of

approximately 700,000 people who became refugees. The First Arab-Israeli War inaugurated a cycle of hostilities that continued over subsequent decades, with each conflict reconfiguring borders and deepening divisions between Israelis and Palestinians (Morris, 2009).

Another conflict began in 1967: the Six-Day War. It marked a fundamental turning point that brought the crisis to a stage at which the situation initially appeared almost impossible to resolve. The State of Israel captured the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula. This occupation drastically altered the geopolitical balance, intensified Palestinian resistance, and contributed to the establishment of organizations such as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), led by Yasser Arafat. It was precisely in this setting of significant Arab territorial loss that the political discourse of Palestinian representatives intensified, emphasizing that Palestinians had become true foreigners in their own land (Said, 2007).

During the 1980s, the First Intifada—a Palestinian popular uprising after almost twenty years of military repression caused by the occupation of the territories mentioned above—brought international attention to the Palestinian cause and prompted an attempted peace process that culminated in the 1993 Oslo Accords. Mediated by U.S. President Bill Clinton, the accords formalized mutual recognition: Israel recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and the PLO recognized Israel's right to exist as a sovereign nation-state. The terms of Oslo nevertheless favored the State of Israel because, while offering Palestinians the possibility of self-government, they left intact Israel's existing military power and territorial control and indefinitely postponed central issues such as possession of Jerusalem, Israeli settlements, and the return of refugees (Said, 2012).

Although these negotiations fostered hopes for a two-state solution, the continuation of the occupation, especially the expansion of settlements in the West Bank, and the violence of fundamentalist groups such as Hamas ultimately undermined the process. The outbreak of the Second Intifada in the early 2000s intensified polarization, leading Israel to construct a physical separation barrier and consolidate the blockade of the Gaza Strip (Said, 2012).

Today, the conflict remains unresolved, with successive rounds of failed negotiations and escalating violence, particularly after 2023, when the radical group Hamas carried out an attack against the State of Israel. This prompted a severe response from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) that resulted in a true "Palestinian Genocide," further polarizing the conflict within the international system and precluding the emergence of a peaceful solution, at least in the coming years (Earley; Murphy, 2025).

It is therefore clear that the complexity of the problem lies at the intersection of historical, religious, territorial, and political factors, as well as international influence, which frequently reinforces internal divisions. Any analysis of the conflict must therefore connect the war to its historical context, because narratives and collective memories have shaped the region's reality in such a way that justifications for the use of force are constantly found.

A constructivist view of the Israel-Palestine conflict

Constructivist Theory emerged in International Relations as an alternative to the traditional currents of realism and liberalism. It innovates by asserting that international reality cannot be understood solely through material factors or institutional arrangements. Beyond the logic of anarchy or cooperation, this theoretical current emphasizes that ideas, norms, and identities play a central role in constructing international politics. This means that states' interests are not fixed or inherent to the creation of each state; rather, they are socially developed and historically situated, arising from interactions and symbolic disputes (Wendt, 2014).

This conceptual shift profoundly marked the field of International Relations by opening space for the analysis of the power of ideas. It was enshrined in Wendt's maxim (1992, p. 395, emphasis in original), "Anarchy is what states make of it [...]." This demonstrates that it is not material structures themselves that determine state behavior, but the shared meanings that actors attribute to them.

In discussing Constructivism, Adler (1999) highlights precisely this socio-cognitive dimension of international politics, stressing that state action is shaped by patterns of belief and social practices that lend stability to expectations. This point is essential to understanding that norms and identities do not operate merely as background conditions; they structure how actors define what is or is not legitimate, acceptable, and possible in the formulation of foreign policy. Carvalho (2020) likewise emphasizes that constructivism reveals the "power of ideas" as a constitutive element of international reality, showing that actors' actions are guided and limited not only by material factors, but above all by shared narratives and values. These theoretical contributions redirect attention toward dimensions frequently marginalized by other theoretical currents and, in the Israeli-Palestinian case, make it possible to understand the weight of symbolic disputes.

The Israel-Palestine conflict offers a particularly rich field for analysis from this perspective because, as already stated, it is not solely a territorial dispute but a struggle much more closely tied to clashing narratives and the recognition of identities. The same historical

event may acquire opposite meanings depending on the side from which the conflict is analyzed. For Israelis, the creation of their nation-state in 1948 represented the realization of a project of national return after centuries of diaspora and persecution; for Palestinians, the process symbolized the Nakba, the "catastrophe" of the loss of their land (Said, 2012). The material reality of the establishment of the State of Israel must therefore be read in light of the symbolic constructions that give meaning to that event.

This theoretical lens makes it possible to see that identities and interests are not fixed, but constructed and open to transformation. The First Intifada and the negotiation processes that followed in the 1990s, such as the Oslo Accords, exemplify this. Although they did not lead to lasting peace, they marked an important discursive change in which the State of Israel and the PLO recognized each other, representing a significant advance (Adler, 1999).

From a Constructivist perspective, this type of transformation can be understood only by considering the importance of the social and normative representations consolidated at the time. Not only the balance of power, but also reciprocal legitimation and the construction of trust are decisive in the course of the conflict (Wendt, 2014). This perspective also shows how norms, ideas, and identities shape the expectations and practices of international actors, offering a broader framework for understanding possibilities for change in the conflict (Adler, 1999).

Another valuable contribution of Constructivism is to reveal how notions of threat and security are discursively shaped. The Israeli perception of an existential threat arises not only from strategic assessments, but also from the historical collective memory of persecution, especially the Holocaust, which reinforces the narrative of national vulnerability (Said, 2012). Palestinians, by contrast, interpret the occupations, settlements, and physical barriers built by the State of Israel as conclusive evidence of a colonial policy and an attempt by Israel to erase Palestinian national identity (Carvalho, 2020). The same material action, such as construction of the wall, therefore cannot be understood as a simple measure: for Israel it is an instrument of defense, while for Palestinians it symbolizes the institutionalization of segregation and territorial exclusion (Wendt, 2014). It is in precisely this kind of dispute over meaning that Constructivism demonstrates its analytical value.

The theory also helps explain the role of international norms and disputes over them in this specific conflict. Concepts such as human rights, peoples' self-determination, and terrorism are neither neutral nor universal in their application; they are constructed and mobilized as instruments of legitimation (Said, 2012; Wendt, 2014). In this respect, Just War theory approaches the constructivist perspective, because definitions of a "just cause" or the "legitimate use of force" depend heavily on normative frameworks and internationally accepted

narratives (Walzer, 2003). Labeling certain practices as “resistance” or “terrorism” does not derive from objective criteria but from narrative battles in the international arena, where different actors attempt to impose their understanding of events. This demonstrates the crucial nature of the struggle over the power of ideas, since it shapes what becomes acceptable to the international community and directly affects the room for maneuver available to those involved (Carvalho, 2020).

Because justifications for the use of force—whether by Israel or by Palestinian groups such as Hamas—cannot be understood solely through a military lens, whether a war is considered “just” or “unjust” depends precisely on the norms and narratives supporting the legitimation of violence (Wendt, 2014; Adler, 1999). Israel frames attacks carried out in Palestinian territories against members of radical groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah as the legitimate defense of its territory, because it regards these groups as a genuine existential threat. Some Palestinian militants, in turn, justify recourse to violence as a struggle against occupation and for their people’s self-determination—a true struggle for the existence of their state (Said, 2012). Constructivist Theory thus shows that the criteria leading people to believe that a war is genuinely just are shaped by normative and identity-based interpretations, not only by concrete and objective facts (Carvalho, 2020).

In summary, a constructivist view of the Israel-Palestine conflict reveals that it cannot be explained solely by material or institutional factors, as realists and liberals would maintain. It is a conflict permeated by historical narratives, national identities, and religious values that give meaning to the actors’ actions and shape their perceptions of threat and legitimacy. Any lasting solution must therefore consider not only territorial division but also mutual recognition of each people’s identities, memories, and representations. Many of the deepest barriers to peace lie in the symbolic and normative spheres, and only an approach that integrates these dimensions can open viable paths toward overcoming the impasse.

Jewish and Islamic conceptions of just war theory

Analyzing war from the perspective of religious traditions requires an understanding that, long before Western political thought systematized the criteria for a “Just War,” theological doctrines already contained norms, principles, and moral interpretations seeking to delimit when and how the use of force could be considered legitimate. As religions with complete normative and civilizational systems, Judaism and Islam are not limited to spiritual or ritual dimensions; both offer comprehensive conceptions of justice, order, and conflict.

Studying their views on war is therefore, in essence, an inquiry into how morality, faith, and politics intertwine around the idea of legitimacy (Armstrong, 2001).

From the Constructivist perspective proposed by Wendt (2014), these religious conceptions may be understood as products of social and historical constructions. The very meaning of "Just War" is not universal; it derives from identity contexts and values that shape the behavior of actors, whether states, peoples, or religious communities. As the author states, international reality is constituted intersubjectively—that is, through the shared meanings that actors attribute to the social world. When Judaism and Islam define what constitutes a legitimate war, they are in fact producing their own normative orders, which reflect and reinforce their collective identities.

Carvalho (2020) deepens this understanding by highlighting the power of ideas as a constitutive element of international reality. In religious conceptions of war, ideas not only interpret violence but also shape it, operating as symbolic structures that legitimize or condemn particular forms of behavior. Constructivist Theory therefore provides an essential set of tools for analyzing Jewish and Islamic traditions, because it reveals that the criteria for the legitimacy of war do not emerge from a moral vacuum but from disputes over meaning anchored in systems of belief.

Just War Theory, formulated in the West and later secularized, can be read through Constructivism as part of this same logic: an attempt to regulate violence on the basis of values that can be shared among different groups in pursuit of genuine moral consensus. What changes when the analysis moves into the religious sphere is that the source of legitimacy is found not in the political or legal institutions belonging to a state, but in theological principles and commandments. What is "just," therefore, is that which is fully aligned with the divine will and, consequently, with preservation of the order that God created (Walzer, 2003).

In Judaism, this order is manifested in the covenantal relationship between God and the people of Israel, from which the categories of obligatory war (milhemet mitzvah) and discretionary war (milhemet reshut) derive, both permeated by notions of divine obedience and restorative justice (Armstrong, 2001). In Islam, the notion of jihad encompasses spiritual and political dimensions. Originally conceived as a moral striving for righteousness, it may in certain contexts assume the character of defending the community (umma) against external aggression (Esposito, 2010).

In both cases, the legitimacy of the use of force stems from identity-based and normative constructions that seek to harmonize faith and ethics. When just, war is not merely a necessity for survival but a means of reaffirming the spiritual and collective covenant itself. This

conception, however, is not static; it is reinterpreted according to the historical challenges, conflicts, and narratives faced by each tradition (Walzer, 2003).

Understanding Jewish and Islamic conceptions of Just War therefore requires not only a theological reading but also a sociopolitical one. The norms, beliefs, and values that guide the martial and moral conduct of these traditions interact with the same symbolic mechanisms that structure contemporary international politics. Studying these conceptions thus sheds light on how the sacred and the political intertwine in legitimizing violence and how the morality of war remains, even today, a field of dispute over the power of ideas and control of narratives about what is just and legitimate (Wendt, 2014; Carvalho, 2020).

5.1 Judaism and just war

From its earliest sources, the Jewish tradition contains an articulated reflection on legitimate violence, authority, and the moral limits of armed conflict. This reflection arises from the theological framework of the covenant between God and the people of Israel, embedded in the foundational narratives of the Jewish sacred book, the Torah, in which wars and battles appear both as instruments of divine judgment and as means of defense and restoration of communal justice. Within this framework, war is conceived not as an end in itself but as an action situated within a religious and ethical horizon. It must serve a higher purpose connected to preservation of the community and maintenance of the moral order established by God. Normative categories that contemporary discussions bring close to the modern concept of “Just War” emerge from this tension between the demand for collective survival and the pursuit of moral conformity with divine law (Armstrong, 2001).

From the legal and moral standpoint of Jewish tradition, specialized literature commonly distinguishes between forms of war considered “obligatory” (milhemet mitzvah) and those considered “discretionary” (milhemet reshut). Obligatory wars are frequently associated with religious duties, defense of the people, or fulfillment of a divine command. Discretionary wars, in turn, encompass campaigns dependent on human decision—hence the name—and do not enjoy the same unquestionable normative status as the former (Armstrong, 2001).

This distinction is important because it emphasizes that even when reasons morally justify a conflict, not all violence is morally equivalent. Some military actions are framed as moral requirements, while others are administrative permissions subject to limits imposed by prudence and the community’s ethics. It is important to note, however, that the historical

reinterpretation of these categories—especially during the formation of the modern state and later national conflicts—demonstrates that what counts as an "obligation" or an "option" is open to social and political construction (Walzer, 2003).

Walzer (2003) offers a valuable analytical resource for connecting these classical religious sources to contemporary political theory. According to him, Jewish traditions, with their narratives of biblical wars and divine commands, have been reinterpreted in light of enduring moral concerns such as the distinction between combatants and noncombatants, the proportionality of the harm caused, and the subordination of military action to just ends. In his interpretation, biblical stories do not function only as precedents authorizing the use of force; when read critically, they also provide normative materials supporting restrictive principles on the use of violence. This critical dimension is especially important when considering the contemporary use of religious heritage to justify state action (Walzer, 2003).

Modernity and the emergence of Zionism introduced new interpretive factors into this tradition. The Jewish national claim to a state and the return to the historic territory required traditional categories concerning the legitimacy of war to be adapted to the context of building the State of Israel and the need for collective security. In this process, religious readings concerning the duty to protect the community and the sacredness of the land were mobilized, sometimes as an ethical basis for defensive actions and sometimes as a symbolic resource supporting political claims. Karen Armstrong (2011) helps situate these transformations historically by showing how the centrality of sacred spaces such as Jerusalem and the persistence of collective memories nourish discourses of legitimacy that cross the religious and political spheres, giving symbolic meaning to military decisions and the creation of security policies.

At the level of concrete norms, the rabbinic tradition and later commentators developed ethical safeguards that resemble contemporary institutions of Just War, including concern for civilians, restrictions on disproportionate methods and means of force, and criticism of practices representing revenge or extermination. Although biblical sources contain episodes of severe violence, later religious interpretation tends to reread such texts within a framework in which communal moral law imposes limits. This position becomes particularly sensitive when military practice is analyzed in contexts where the line between combatant and civilian is blurred, making proportionality and discrimination central issues in modern discussions of asymmetric conflicts (Walzer, 2003). Drawing on his familiarity with Jewish tradition, Walzer (2003) shows that its religious heritage contains both texts that can be used to justify wars and critical repertoires that impose moral restraints on violence.

The conception of legitimate authority in Jewish tradition—historically understood as deriving directly from God but politically articulated through the people's leaders and institutions—also complicates application of Just War criteria. In a community without modern centralized power, decisions concerning war were often mediated by charismatic leaders and communal norms. In the modern era, with the existence of a strong nation-state, these decisions came to be made within the state sphere, producing a shift from religious to political authority or, in many cases, an articulation between the two. This shift has direct implications for who may declare war and under what circumstances the community will recognize such a declaration as legitimate. Contemporary legitimation therefore involves both legal and secular arguments and appeals to religious tradition, showing once more that defining what is "just" results from an interplay of arguments (Walzer, 2003).

In practice, especially in the military and political experiences of contemporary Jewish states and movements, clear manifestations of this normative ambivalence can be seen in discourses invoking the "obligation" of defense (milhemet mitzvah) and memory as moral justification. The tension between security and morality—between the need to protect a community marked by historical vulnerability and the imperative to respect norms that minimize suffering—is thus a central feature of the contemporary Jewish debate on war. This tension also explains why recourse to the Just War repertoire within the Jewish world is often accompanied by self-critical reflections and interpretive disputes over the extent to which military actions satisfy traditional ethical criteria (Walzer, 2003; Armstrong, 2001).

Finally, it is important to underline that the Constructivist reading guiding this study redirects the analysis toward the performative dimension of these discourses. The way leaders, rabbis, intellectuals, and the public itself construct and reiterate justifications for war helps naturalize certain practices as morally acceptable while marginalizing others. Jewish reflection on Just War must therefore be studied both as a textual tradition and as a social practice undergoing continuous reinterpretation, capable of influencing concrete political decisions and of being instrumentalized as a form of international legitimation. This explains why analysis of Just War in the Israeli context—and more broadly among Jewish communities involved in questions of collective defense—requires simultaneous engagement with theology, history, and contemporary normative dynamics (Walzer, 2003; Armstrong, 2001).

5.2 Islam and just war

In Islamic thought, reflection on the legitimacy of war is deeply rooted in theological and legal principles that seek to harmonize defense of the faith and the community with preservation of justice and order. Since the beginnings of the Muslim tradition, the notion of jihad has occupied a central role in this debate, although in the West it is frequently misunderstood as mere "holy war" (Said, 2007). In its original sense, however, jihad means "effort," "struggle," or "striving," a broad category encompassing armed combat in defense of the community as well as the individual's inner and spiritual effort to live according to the will of Allah (God). This polysemy reflects the moral and spiritual breadth of the concept, which is not restricted to the use of force but places it within an ethical horizon of discipline, faith, and responsibility (Armstrong, 2001).

Islamic tradition distinguishes two levels of jihad: the greater jihad (al-jihad al-akbar), concerning the Muslim's inner struggle against sin and injustice within, and the lesser jihad (al-jihad al-asghar), corresponding to physical combat in defense of the Muslim community (umma). This distinction is fundamental because it shows that the use of force in classical Islamic thought is a derivative and limited form, subordinate to an ethic of pure intention and justice. Combat becomes legitimate only when aimed at defending the faith, protecting believers, and restoring the peace and order established by the divine being, never when connected to the pursuit of power as an end in itself. Offensive war directed solely toward expansion is therefore morally condemnable (Esposito, 2010).

Throughout history, Muslim jurists and theologians developed a complex normative body regulating recourse to war, anchored in the Qur'an, the Sunnah (the tradition of the Prophet), and later interpretations by Islamic legal schools. The Holy Qur'an, in Samir El Hayek's translation, recognizes the need for defense when it states, "[...] Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress, for God does not love transgressors [...] (O Alcorão, 1994, 2:190)"; at the same time, it establishes ethical limits on violence by warning that "[...] if they incline toward peace, then incline toward it as well and trust in God [...] (O Alcorão, 1994, 8:61)."

This tension between permission to fight and the moral duty to seek reconciliation expresses the core of the Islamic ethics of war, in which violence is conceived not as an instrument of expansion or domination but as an evil tolerated only when necessary to prevent a greater evil, such as oppression, injustice, or destruction of the community. This deeply rooted conception reveals an ethic of restraint and proportionality that is essentially close to the central principles of Just War theory developed in the West (Armstrong, 2001).

According to Esposito (2010), the concept of jihad was historically contextualized in societies where religion and politics were inseparable dimensions. The Islamic Caliphate, as the political structure of the Muslim community, was regarded as guardian of faith and justice; war waged under its authority therefore possessed a specific moral and legal character. This fusion of spiritual and temporal power meant that legitimate authority to declare war did not reside in any individual or group, but in leadership recognized as legitimate by the faithful—a conception that, to some extent, echoes the requirement of "just authority" in Christian Just War theory. The legitimacy of jihad thus depended on correct intention (niyyah), a just cause, and observance of ethical limits during conflict, especially with respect to the protection of civilians, women, children, and sacred sites.

Contrary to the modern stereotype associating Islam with violence, classical sources emphasize proportionality and the containment of harm as foundations of Muslim belief. War must not be motivated by hatred, a desire for revenge, or territorial gain, but by the moral duty to restore justice and ensure the people's safety. Even in combat, the Qur'an and the Sunnah prescribe clear rules of conduct, such as not mutilating bodies, destroying crops, killing innocent people, or forcing the religious conversion of those who follow other faiths. These norms reinforce that, long before the modern Western formulation of Just War theory, Islam already possessed an ethical structure limiting the use of force and grounded in moral responsibility before God (Armstrong, 2001).

The political history of the Islamic world nevertheless shows that application of these principles varied enormously according to historical circumstances and power relations. During periods of Islamic expansion and later in anticolonial struggles, jihad was reinterpreted as an instrument of resistance and liberation from foreign domination. This conceptual plasticity demonstrates that the concept is not fixed but constantly renegotiated, a point at which constructivism offers a relevant interpretive key. As Armstrong (2001) notes, Islam, like other religious traditions, produces moral meanings that adapt to historical and political conditions. The discourse on "Just War" in Islam is therefore not a dogma, but a genuine field of symbolic disputes over which struggle is legitimate.

In the contemporary context, this ambiguity is particularly evident. Political and religious leaders and militant groups frequently reinterpret the concept of jihad, especially in situations ranging from resistance to foreign occupation to defense of minority Muslim communities. On the other hand, state regimes and international organizations also mobilize the same term to delegitimize insurgent actions by labeling them "terrorism." This semantic and normative dispute precisely reflects the dynamic described by constructivism, in which the

legitimacy of war does not reside in absolute principles but is constructed through narratives, symbols, and norms that shape international and domestic recognition of what is considered "just" or "illegitimate" (Esposito, 2010).

When compared with Islamic tradition, Just War Theory reveals both convergences and tensions. As in Christianity and Judaism, Islam seeks to moralize war, subordinate force to justice, and define criteria of legitimacy. Islam, however, places stronger emphasis on the unity between faith and community, so that Just War is inseparable from defense of the umma and maintenance of social and religious peace. Legitimacy is therefore less a matter of law in the positivist sense and more a matter of fidelity to the divine will and the revealed ethical order. Armstrong (2001) observes that this spiritual dimension of war makes jihad not only a political phenomenon but also a moral and existential experience—a way of proving the righteousness of faith in times of crisis.

Today, contemporary Muslim intellectuals and reformist theologians seek to reinterpret jihad in more ethical and humanitarian terms, bringing it closer to the idea of global justice and resistance while separating it from violence and oppression. This hermeneutic renewal seeks to recover the concept's moral core by emphasizing that its original conception is an effort toward human dignity, peace, and universal solidarity. In this reading, war—even when defensive—is viewed as a last resort and must always remain subordinate to the principles of mercy and proportionality, central values of Islamic ethics that are compatible with modern formulations of Just War theory (Esposito, 2010).

Finally, as in Judaism, the meaning of war in Islam can be fully understood only by recognizing that its meanings are socially constructed. The dispute over defining when an interpretation of jihad is legitimate and when it is terrorism, who possesses the moral authority to declare war, and which actions fall within divine parameters reflects not only theological disagreements but also struggles for recognition and power in the international system. A Constructivist reading therefore makes it possible to understand Just War in Islam as a dynamic normative discourse that is simultaneously religious, political, and identity-based, structures practices, legitimizes resistance, and defines boundaries of belonging (Esposito, 2010).

Final considerations

The analysis developed throughout this study shows that the conflict between Israel and Palestine cannot be explained by purely material, territorial, or simply strategic factors. It is a dispute deeply rooted in the symbolic and moral dimensions of international politics.

Throughout the research, it became clear that understanding this conflict requires moving beyond the traditional boundaries of geopolitical analysis and entering the realm of the ideas, beliefs, and identities that shape the actions and justifications of the actors involved. Constructivism, as formulated by Alexander Wendt (2014), offers an appropriate lens for this undertaking by affirming that the international system is socially constructed and that states' interests and identities are not immutable givens, but historical and discursive products. From this perspective, the Israel-Palestine conflict is not merely a dispute over territory, but a dispute over legitimacy, recognition, and memory.

Just War Theory, born of the Western Christian tradition and modernized through the writings of Michael Walzer (2003), seeks to establish moral limits on the use of force. It recognizes that although war is always an evil, it may be morally acceptable if it meets criteria such as just cause, legitimate authority, and proportionality. When applied in different contexts, however, it proves permeable to the cultural and religious interpretations that shape its practical application (Walzer, 2003). In Judaism, as analyzed above, the idea of legitimate war is connected to the covenant between God and the people of Israel. The distinctions between obligatory and discretionary war indicate that violence, even when permitted, must always be exercised under the control of divine law and directed toward restoration of justice. In Islam, the notion of jihad was originally conceived as a moral and spiritual striving in defense of the umma, with armed combat tolerated only as a last resort in response to aggression and injustice. Both traditions thus contain an ethical element that seeks to limit war and preserve human dignity.

This finding is fundamental because it demonstrates that dialogue between religion and political ethics is not impossible; on the contrary, it offers paths toward moral convergence. The problem lies not in religion itself, but in the political instrumentalization of its narratives. When theological discourse is captured by state or ideological interests, the original meaning of justice and moderation is lost. As Armstrong (2001) observes, both Judaism and Islam begin from the premise that war, although sometimes necessary, must always have peace as its end. This idea echoes the classical formulation of Just War itself: war is morally acceptable only when it seeks to restore order rather than perpetuate destruction.

By bringing this discussion into the field of International Relations, Constructivism helps explain that the notion of a "Just War" is, above all, a social construction. The justifications that make war "legitimate" are shaped by normative, identity-based, and cultural discourses. Israel and Palestine each construct distinct moral narratives about violence, and those narratives influence not only their actions but also how they are perceived by the

international community. As Carvalho (2020) notes, the power of ideas is also the power to define what is acceptable within the international system.

A crucial point highlighted by this research is that the current antagonism between Israelis and Palestinians is not a historical constant. There have been periods of relatively peaceful coexistence, especially under Ottoman rule between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, when the millet system allowed different religious communities to coexist under the same empire, each with cultural and legal autonomy. Although not free of tensions, this period was marked by remarkable social stability in contrast to modern sectarianism (Armstrong, 2011).

A return to peaceful coexistence between Jews and Palestinians should therefore be viewed not as a utopia but as a possibility grounded in historical roots. The memory of coexistence under the Ottoman Empire demonstrates that peace is a possible construction when mediated by political structures that recognize the plurality of identities and the value of the other. This memory offers a lesson for the present: if war is the product of constructed narratives and perceptions, peace can be as well.

At the end of this study, it is possible to affirm that analysis of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians through the lens of Just War and Constructivism reveals an essential truth: justice, like war, is a human creation. If human beings are capable of creating justifications for killing, they are also capable of creating foundations for peaceful coexistence.

When read without political distortion, the ethics of the Jewish and Islamic traditions converge on the same ideal: violence is acceptable only when it seeks to restore dignity and moral order. The study concludes that peace between Israel and Palestine depends not only on diplomatic treaties or military force, but on profound symbolic reconstruction. The ethical meaning of Just War must be recovered, not as authorization for combat, but as a moral limitation and a commitment to peace. The challenge of our time is to transform the logic of violence into a logic of mutual recognition. And if the past proved that Jews and Arabs could coexist under the same sky, perhaps the future can still prove that peace in the region, like war, is a fully possible human construction.

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