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Conflict perception: a new scale with evidence from Israel and Palestine

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Abstract

Purpose – The current work aims to introduce the concept of conflict perception and construct a scale that measures individual differences in perceptions about conflicts along religious, national and material dimensions. The concept and the measure are developed in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Design/methodology/approach – The research design combines three methodological elements: 14 focus groups in Israel and the West Bank, which represent diversity in place of residence, religion, age and political background; an expert panel review; and a survey of 411 student respondents that was conducted between September 29 and October 9, 2013, among university students in Israel and Palestine.

Findings – The findings show that conflict perception is an individual's subjective view regarding the essence of the conflict and its central issues, the identities of the parties involved and their motivations, which may include material, ideological or symbolic motives, or any combination thereof. A novel scale consisting of five statements that can measure conflict perception that was developed, validated and implemented via a survey sample showed that Palestinians in the West Bank and in Israel have a religious perception of the conflict, whereas Jews have a national perception of the conflict.

Originality/value – First, the paper introduces a new concept that sheds additional light on the micro foundations of peoples' attitudes in conflict situations. Second, it develops and validates a measurement tool for conflict perception that may be usable, with necessary adjustments, in other conflicts. Third, it demonstrates that parties to the conflict do not necessarily share similar perceptions about the conflict, a finding with far-reaching consequences for conflict resolution at both the scholarly and policy levels.

Keywords Conflict resolution, Israel, Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Conflict perception, Protracted conflict, West Bank, Willingness to compromise

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Resolving protracted conflicts is a major goal of many societies. Accomplishing this goal requires a deep understanding of the nature of the conflict, its core issues and how the parties involved perceive it. In this study, we contribute to a better understanding of protracted conflict by introducing the term “conflict perception”, providing tools to measure it and using the new measurement in the Israeli–Palestinian context.



Conflicts are struggles between opposing forces often based on incompatibility or rivalry (Thomas, 1992). Conflict is also defined as an activity that occurs between conscious, though not necessarily rational, beings (Nicholson, 1992, p. 11). History suggests that conflict is a natural consequence of interactions between large groups of people such as clans, tribes, nations and other groups divided by geography, culture, resources or religion. Protracted conflicts (sometimes also called intractable, enduring or ongoing conflicts) last more than a decade and are characterized by persistence and imperviousness to resolution (Azar *et al.*, 1978; Colaresi and Thompson, 2002; Gleditsch *et al.*, 2002; Maoz and Mor, 1996; Mitzen, 2006). They encompass different ingredients such as identity, security and self-determination and involve calculations about gains and losses (Friedman, 2005).

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is one of the most prominent protracted conflicts in the world today, having shaped the lives of Palestinians and Israelis for decades (Brecher, 2017; Harbom and Wallensteen, 2007). A systematic review of the voluminous writing on the subject in both the academic literature and popular press makes clear that different stakeholders in this conflict have deeply held views about it (Caplan, 2009; Dowty, 2007; Morris, 2001; Wasserstein, 2003). Nevertheless, perhaps strangely, the academic literature has relatively little to say about how the immediate parties to the conflict – Israelis and Palestinians – perceive it with respect to the issues at its core and how to measure this perception. The literature includes a limited number of studies that deal with the cause of the conflict (Corstange and York, 2016; Esteban and Mayoral, 2011; Murer, 2012). These are roughly divided between studies that emphasize the identity aspects of the conflict (Auerbach, 2009) and those that emphasize material aspects as a cause (Dowty, 2007; Nie, 2003; O’Lear, 2005; Selby, 2003). Various definitions have been used to describe conflicts such as that between Israelis and Palestinians, including a border conflict, a colonial conflict, an ethnic conflict and a religious struggle (Azar *et al.*, 1978). At the same time, this conflict, like other protracted conflicts, is replete with psychological and social elements (Bar-Tal, 1998, 2000b, 2007; Colaresi and Thompson, 2002; Maoz and McCauley, 2005; Rouhana and Bar-Tal, 1998), including narratives, symbols and myths (Bar-Tal and Salomon, 2006; Bar-Tal *et al.*, 2012; Friedman, 2005). However, the existing literature lacks a comprehensive concept that attempts to determine the way in which individuals in the conflict view its core issues and causes.

Neither are we aware of any scales that aim to measure how people involved in a conflict classify its essence. Scholarly attempts to classify conflicts are limited, and existing scales fall short of covering all types or aspects of them (Esteban and Mayoral, 2011; Fox, 1999; Kempf, 2006). Some previous works on the subject used data from the World Value Survey, but this information is limited and indirect. It does not ask about conflict perception but rather asks about faiths and values that scholars then correlate with conflicts. In the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, hundreds of surveys have been carried out by institutes such as The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, The Center for Palestine Research and Studies, the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center, The Pew Research Center and the Birzeit Center for Development Studies. Although some of them indicate that the Palestinians have religious objectives in the conflict, as our results confirm (Polisar, 2015), none offers a measure for conflict perception that assesses how people classify conflicts and the different perceptions they have about them.

We submit that one reason for this absence is a lack of attention in the field of political psychology to the notion of conflict perceptions in general, not only in the case of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. A number of scholars have dealt with questions about conflict and reconciliation and tackled the social and psychological aspects including narratives and beliefs by emphasizing the difficulty in resolving intractable conflicts, especially those with

identity dimensions (Rouhana and Bar-Tal, 1998). Whereas some scholars have tried to deal with peacebuilding and narratives (Adwan and Bar-On, 2004), others tried using the workshop as a method to identify the barriers in the conflict (Rouhana and Kelman, 1994). In all of the previous studies, various insights emerged. However, no one has created a concept, definition and measurement for how people frame a conflict that links the literature and reality. In other words, scholars have not asked the fundamental question of how perceptions of conflict should be conceptualized and measured. This question is important, because understanding the parties' subjective perceptions about a conflict may provide useful information to guide peace negotiators and third parties playing a mediating role. Our study seeks to achieve this goal, which we believe will contribute to the theoretical and practical aspects of conflict resolution.

In this paper, we offer an innovative conceptualization of and scale for measuring perceptions about conflicts. Although we developed both based on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, they can be adapted to define and measure perceptions of any protracted conflict. In developing the scale, we used a combination of methodologies, including a review of the relevant literature, focus groups, interviews and surveys. The process involved three phases, following DeVellis' (2003) eight-step plan for scale development.

The remainder of the article continues as follows. We first discuss the concepts of *perception* and *protracted conflict*. We then proceed with a brief description of the Israeli–Palestinian case. Later, we detail the three phases involved in developing the scale: formulating the concept, constructing the scale and validating the scale. We conclude with a discussion of the main findings and the theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions of this work.

1.1 Perceptions

The term “perception” can be defined as a point of view, attitude or position regarding an object, person, group or event. Perceptions tend to be differentiated by their direction (positive or negative; Bar-Tal, 2007), but the term also implies a general comprehension of the essential quality or nature of a thing. Various theories suggest how perceptions are formed. Some researchers, who favor a psychological approach to political studies, regard perception as a direct process in which the person “extracts” the relevant information from his or her mind (Rookes and Willson, 2000; Ullman, 1980). Social psychological theories view the formation of perceptions as a process of analyzing past experiences in light of new information and constructing an updated view. The concept of selective perception suggests that we often see what we want to see (Festinger, 1957; Gregory, 1997; Norris and Lovenduski, 2004; Rookes and Willson, 2000).

1.2 Definition of protracted conflict

As noted earlier, a protracted conflict is a prolonged and seemingly irresolvable struggle between two or more opposing parties, manifested in violent engagements that take place over a period of years (Bercovitch *et al.*, 1997; Gleditsch *et al.*, 2002; Mitzen, 2006). Researchers disagree over the minimal duration required for a conflict to qualify as protracted, usually citing values between 10 and 25 years. A second requirement is for a minimal number of engagements occurring within the relevant timeframe, usually between two and seven (Goertz and Diehl, 1993; Jones, 1989). Some researchers define protracted conflicts without reference to specific periods or number of engagements. For example, Azar *et al.* (1978) define protracted conflicts as “hostile interactions which extend over long periods of time with sporadic outbreaks of open warfare fluctuating in frequency and intensity”, and based on deep-seated racial, ethnic, religious and/or cultural animosities.

For Ben-Dor and Dewitt (1987), protracted conflicts have five key dimensions: duration; fluctuating intensity and frequency of interactions between war and peace; the permeation of the conflict to all walks of life – political, cultural, economic and territorial; the impactful involvement of international forces; and finally the absence of a clearly agreed-upon resolution. Similarly, Maoz and Mor (1996) argued that besides the element of duration, protracted conflicts are marked by an assortment of unresolved issues, involve countries that view each other as strategic rivals, focus on the other's statements and actions, invest in intelligence gathering concerning its rival and involve common psychological expressions of hostility and outright violence. According to various studies, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict contains all of the elements of protracted conflict mentioned previously (Ben-Dor and Dewitt, 1987; Dowty, 2007; Maoz and Mor, 1996).

As for type of conflict, scholars have identified three main categories.:

1.2.1 National conflicts. According to Smith (1991, p. 73), nationalism is:

[. . .] an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population which is deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential “nation”.

Modernists in particular view nationalism as a secular movement that replaces traditional religious systems (Juergensmeyer, 1995). A national conflict, therefore, is a conflict between distinct national groups differing in language, religion and/or history and motivated by national ambitions, namely, a collective quest for national self-determination.

1.2.2 Religious conflicts. Religious conflicts may occur when religion is the basis for a group's political ambitions. Religious conflicts may arise between members of the same national group, usually within the same country, as in the case of secular and Orthodox Jews in Israel (Rubin, 2013, 2014). Alternatively, religious conflicts may emanate from ideological differences between religions, whether in different countries or among different religious groups within the same country (Fox, 2004). This type of conflict is dangerous because of its tendency to spread across state borders (Fox, 2004).

1.2.3 Material conflicts. Material conflicts are the result of a clash over control over physical assets (USA Institute of Peace, 2007), which include wealth and power – scarce commodities claimed or pursued by each party to the conflict. Although wealth and power may also be prizes pursued by the parties in nationalist or religious conflicts, material conflicts rely primarily on rational considerations of material loss and gain, as opposed to ideology (Dowty, 2007).

Although scholars often classify conflicts into these three categories, they have not been defined and measured in a single conceptual framework, especially with regard to subjective perceptions of the conflict.

1.2.3.1 The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict and Conflict Perception. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is one of the deepest and most obvious examples of a protracted conflict in modern history. Indeed, the conflict easily meets a substantial portion of the various criteria for protracted conflicts described earlier. It is characterized by a prolonged duration with periodic engagements, has permeated all aspects of life, involved international forces, contains many unresolved issues, has a major strategic component, relies on heavy intelligence gathering, involves psychological expressions of hostility and has no obvious potential resolution (Bar-Tal *et al.*, 2012; Ben-Dor and Dewitt, 1987; Maoz and Mor, 1996).

Two features of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict make this a useful case study for the current research. First, the area involved in the conflict is geographically small; civilians are exposed to attack; and, for social and structural reasons, the conflict affects the lives of nearly all members of the parties, with consequences for their mental, cognitive and physical

well-being (Alimi and Hirsch-Hoefler, 2012; Canetti-Nisim *et al.*, 2009). Second, the issues underlying the Israeli–Palestinian conflict encompass elements from all types of conflict. There is the national element – both Jews and Palestinians claim rights to a national homeland (Khalidi, 1997). Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse (2003) argue that Israelis and Palestinians fit the description of rival nationalities – two groups that live within one another and compete to control the whole state. There is also a religious element – religious claims and justifications regarding the conflict (sacred history and holy places) are central to Jews and Muslims (Al Qaradawi, 2001; Hertzberg, 2000) and provoke collective action (Van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008). Finally, there is also a material element – the land in question is small and poor in crucial resources, such as water, energy and arable land (Dowty, 2007). Hence, the conflict provides an excellent setting for constructing a definition and measure of conflict perception in the context of a protracted conflict.

We now turn to describing the different phases of the research design.

2. Phase 1: Formulating the concept

The aim of the first phase was to conceptualize the way in which individuals from the participating parties perceive conflict rather than an academic conceptualization of it. We adopted this approach because the literature does not include a full definition of the concept. It just provides a definition for each type of conflict. Furthermore, there is no definition and scale related to the “perception of the conflict”, which is a more psychological concept and related to the way people regard conflict, not the pure scientific classification of it.

2.1 Method

For this purpose, we conducted 14 focus group interviews among Palestinians in the West Bank, Palestinians in Israel and Jews in Israel. We excluded the Gaza Strip because security considerations did not allow us to access it. The use of focus groups is based on the well-established empirical advantages of this method for enriching conceptual perspectives when examining a relatively under-studied issue or concept (Stewart *et al.*, 2007). The goal of focus group research, as the literature suggests, is to examine the range of opinions and representations of the issue at hand (Morgan, 1993; Shkedi, 2011). To ensure that the full range of opinions is captured, researchers must review the literature and interview the full spectrum of members of the social group being examined (Gaskell, 2011).

Our 14 focus groups were constructed based on common standards of six to eight participants who have not met before, meeting in a convenient setting for 1 to 2 h, with a moderator (in this case, a member of the research team) who was fluent in their mother tongue. Participants included 32 Israeli Jews (from Tel Aviv, Haifa, Rehovot and Migdal Haemek), 42 Palestinians from Israel (from Nazareth, Umm Elfahim, Sakhnin and Haifa) and 37 Palestinians from the West Bank (from Ramallah, Nablus and the Balata refugee camp). The participants were selected based on place of residence (city, village, refugee camp and mixed city), religion, age (the participants ranged in age from 18 to 60) and political background. To ensure that the interviewees felt able to speak freely, each focus group included only members of the same population (Palestinians from the West Bank, Palestinians from Israel and Israeli Jews). The focus group participants were recruited in several ways. The researchers knew a minority of the participants personally, whereas a majority of the participants were recruited through advertisements or by appealing for volunteers from nongovernmental organizations, different political parties and social activists. Therefore, the participants were ordinary people who represented different social and political backgrounds. In addition, several of the focus groups for each subsample were held in public places, and the moderators recruited volunteers on the spot, establishing that

constructing an updated view (Rookes and Willson, 2000), rather than the approach that sees perception as a direct process in which a person “extracts” the relevant information from his or her memory or cognition. The participants’ speech patterns support this conclusion. For example, in response to the question “What is a conflict?”, many participants used phrases such as “I think”, “In my opinion” and “For me”, which signify that the person is expressing an active thought process and not a set thought.

With respect to the essence of the conflict, the participants referred, indirectly or directly, to the three types of conflict identified in the literature (national, religious and material). For example, Interviewee 4, a 32-year-old Jewish Israeli man, said, “A conflict is a contradiction of interests, no matter which interests: financial, ideological. Ideology plays a part in everything.” Interviewee 4 appears to be suggesting that all conflicts are based at least partly on ideological grounds, but that material considerations are also likely to be relevant. Another participant, Interviewee 6, a 32-year-old Israeli Palestinian man, was inclined to classify the conflict as primarily national, but with a growing religious component. In his words:

I see the conflict as national, because it started with the rise of national movements, not religious ones. Jews and Arabs co-existed, to some extent, before the Zionist movement, so I do see it as based on nationalism; I do see global processes making it more and more religious, because America is against Arab culture, against Muslims.

Respondents also used a variety of terms to refer to the parties in the conflict, including “nation”, “people” and “citizens”. Thus, perceptions of a conflict seem to color (and be colored by) the way people think of the major groups involved.

Some participants attempted to include as many issues as possible to fit their perceived understanding of the conflict. The following issues were prominent: refugees (national), Jerusalem (religious), borders (material), water supply (material), security (material), mutual recognition (national), the land (all three types) and settlements (material and national). When asked how conflict perception relates to these issues, participants in the focus groups clearly tried to emphasize the issue that was most closely related to their perception of the essence of the conflict. For instance, those who regarded the conflict as essentially religious might identify Al Aqsa or the holy places as the most important issue, whereas those who saw the conflict as essentially national might emphasize refugees, and those who viewed it as essentially material might highlight borders and control over natural resources. The following themes, shown in Table I, were the main bases for establishing the questions used in the scale. As the table indicates, identities, core issues in the conflict, sides of the conflict and beliefs were the major issues raised by the participants in the different groups.

Based on the themes that emerged from the focus groups and the literature, we generated the following definition of conflict perception: *Conflict perception is an individual’s subjective view regarding the essence of the conflict and its core issues, the identities of the parties involved, and their motivations.* In this definition, the terms “essence”, “identity” and “motivation” relate to whether the roots of the conflict emanate from material motives such as a conflict over resources or ideological or symbolic motives such as religion and nationality. Our qualitative analysis thus supports the literature in restricting conflicts to three main types: religious, national and material.

Scholars define and deal with other concepts such as political ideology, narrative and ethos of conflict that may be related to our term. However, it is important to distinguish between these existing concepts and our term, “conflict perception.” According to Erikson and Tedin (2003), political ideology is a “set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved” (p. 64). Likewise, according to Denzau and North (2000, p. 24):

Identified frame	Mentioned issue	Jews in Israel (%)	Palestinians in Israel (%)	Palestinians in West Bank (%) ^a
Religious conflict	Jerusalem, Al Aqsa, Temple Mount and holy places	29	50	54
	Religious issues (holy, God, God's promise, religious faith)	59	36	31
	Conflict sides: Muslims vs Jews	12	14	15
National conflict	Homeland, Zionism, nationalism	33	21	31
	Settlements or occupation	11	14	13
	Conflict sides: Arabs vs Israelis	17	7	6
	Sovereignty, state/country	28	29	25
	Power and control	4.5	25	17
Material conflict	Territory	27	25	33
	Resources, economy, water	36	25	33
	Borders	4.5	25	17
	Political, leaders	14	0	0
	Security	14	0	0

Note: ^aWord counts generated using WordCounter.net

Table I.
Prevalence of issue by conflict perception

[political] ideologies are the shared framework of mental models that groups of individuals possess that provide both an interpretation of the environment and a prescription as to how that environment should be structured.

According to Berger (1997, p. 4), the second term, narrative, means:

[...] a story, and stories tell about things that have happened or are happening to people, animals, aliens from outer space [...] That is, a story contains a sequence of events, which means that narratives take place within or over [...] some kind of time period" (cited in Auerbach, 2009, p. 293).

The third term, "ethos of conflict", that Bar-Tal *et al.* (2012) developed as a measure is defined in Bar-Tal (2000b) as a configuration of central, shared societal beliefs that provide a particular dominant orientation to a society and give meaning to societal life under conditions of intractable conflict.

"Conflict perception" differs from these terms, because it refers to a specific psychological process, which takes place in the context of protracted conflict, and relates to how an individual in a conflict interprets the character and essence of the conflict. This perception is subjective and hence can differ from reality. It is related to the nature of the conflict and includes its symbolic and material aspects.

3. Phase 2: Constructing the scale

Based on the definition that emerged from Phase 1, and following DeVellis (1991, 2003), we constructed a 15-item conflict perception scale for the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which, with contextual adjustments, can be used in other conflict situations. The items relate to the reasons for the conflict, the motives of the participants (both historically and currently) and/or the most important interests implied by the key issues. Each item has three possible responses, each pointing toward a different perception of the conflict's fundamental core. The first implies that the conflict is essentially religious, the second that it is essentially national and the third that it is essentially material in nature. We selected these responses based on the results from the focus groups. The participants expressed almost a consensus about the meaning of each response and how it related to each conflict perception.

The purpose of the scale is to identify respondents' most dominant perception. Therefore, only one response to each question is permitted (even though participants would be likely to rate all three options as true if asked about each one separately, and this method helps us understand their priorities). Using this method, the hypothetical respondent above would receive a 1 if they answered most questions as religious, a 2 if they answered most questions as nationalist or a 3 if they answered most questions as material.

In addition, we assumed that the 15 items are independent of one another, yet when added together, form a holistic outlook. Therefore, each of the 15 items is equally weighted (DeVellis, 2003). The outcome, a conflict perception scale, is presented in Table II.

To help validate the content of the scale (DeVellis, 2003), the 15 items were reviewed by a panel of five experts (Prof As'ad Ghanem, Prof Nadim Rouhana, Prof Amal Jamal, Dr Mary Totry and Dr Sarah Ozacky-Lazar), whom we selected according to their specialty, background (Palestinians and Jews), scholarly contribution and different research approaches to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Each expert received a document detailing the steps taken thus far and was asked to comment on the scale items and their compatibility. We asked the experts to evaluate the degree to which the questions correspond to the nominal definition of conflict perception described earlier, as well as to review each item for double-barreled questions, vagueness, repetition or other problems (Oreg, 2003).

Based on the experts' comments, the original wording was slightly altered in several items to make them clearer and easier to understand. For instance, Question 8 was changed from "What should become of the country in the future?" to "What character should the country have in the future?" In addition, several of the possible responses were altered following the expert review. Three of these related to the problematic relationship between Zionism and Jewish nationalism.

We also asked the experts to propose examples and operative definitions of conflict perception based on their understanding of the concept. The examples they gave all corresponded to examples raised in the focus groups and that we included in the scale. For instance, when asked about the central issues, one expert suggested land. In another example, an expert noted that the conflict is being waged between different groups, between Arabs and Zionists and between Muslims and Jews, which corresponds to answers we received in the focus groups and based on which we constructed the scale.

4. Phase 3: Validating the scale

The expert review supported the scale's internal validity. The purpose of Phase 3 of the study was to examine the scale's discriminant validity, that is the degree to which it captures a theoretically different construct from other existing scales. For this purpose, we conducted a survey of individuals from the three groups involved in the conflict: Palestinians from the West Bank, Palestinians from Israel and Israeli Jews. In addition to testing the preliminary scale with them, this phase served as another stage in developing the scale. We asked the participants to comment on items on the proposed scale that they regarded as problematic, for example overly simplistic or insufficiently clear.

With respect to discriminant validity, we suggest three primary constructs whose scales could be correlated with the proposed conflict perception scale: attitudes toward and willingness to compromise, militancy and exposure to violence and conflict. These relationships are not necessarily straightforward. For instance, the relationship between openness to reconciliation and conflict perception may vary based on the nature of that perception. A purely material conflict may be more readily reconcilable than one with ideological and symbolic dimensions (Auerbach, 2009), such as a conflict between two opposing national narratives. Nonetheless, the risk of overlap between these constructs is

Question	Religious	Nationalist	Material
In your opinion, the conflict in the Middle East is a	1- Muslim-Jewish conflict	2- Arab-Zionist conflict	3- Conflict of resources, land and interests
For you, the issue of Jerusalem OR al-Quds concerns	1- The Holy City	2- The national capital of the Jewish OR Arab people	3- The capital of an independent Israeli OR Palestinian state
For you, the issue of the land is significant because it is	1- The Promised Land	2- The Land of Israel OR Arab Land	3- A politically and strategically important land
What is your vision for this land?	1- A state that follows religious law (halacha OR as part of the caliphate)	2- A Jewish OR Arab national state	3- A state for all its citizens, regardless of nationality or religion, as long as it is strong
Who are the sides in this conflict?	1- Muslims vs Jews	2- Arabs vs Zionists	3- Palestinians vs Israelis
To you, the land of Palestine OR Israel is:	1- The land of the Bible OR Koran	2- The land of the Jewish OR Arab people	3- The land of Israeli OR Palestinian citizens
The one issue you will not compromise on is:	1- Jerusalem	2- A Jewish ethnic majority OR the Right of Return	3- Defensible borders, access to water and territorial contiguity
What character should the country have in the future?	1- A state run according to religion	2- A state with a nationalistic orientation	3- A strong state, able to sustain a high quality of life, irrespective of its national or religious character
It's important to maintain the borders of	1- 1948	2- 1967, without losing any Jewish national (Zionist)/Palestinian rights	3- The border is immaterial, as long as the country is rich and prosperous
For you which is more upsetting?	1- Surrendering the Temple Mount and the Wailing Wall OR al-Quds to the Muslims OR Jews	2- The return of Palestinian refugees OR Abandoning the return of Palestinian refugees	3- Surrendering significant territories with vital resources and lands, major traffic routes or water reservoirs OR Abandoning [...]
Once peace is achieved, do you support establishing economic and social ties between the two nations?	1- I do not support it, the Jews are not to be trusted I do not support it/the Muslims are not to be trusted	2- I may support it if the Palestinian people get a state and full rights/I have no problem with it as long as we retain our rights as Zionist Jewish state	3- Definitely support establishing economic and social ties
When, in your opinion, will the conflict end?	1- The conflict with the Muslims OR Jews will not end until Judgment Day	2- The conflict with the Arabs OR Israelis will end when: The state of Israel is recognized as the nation state of the Jewish people OR the Palestinians get their rights and reclaim Arab territories	3- The conflict will end when there is an agreement dividing the resources and territories fairly

(continued)

Table II.

Question	Religious	Nationalist	Material
The settlement migration of Jews in the early twentieth century was motivated by	1- Religious motives	2- National aspirations	3- Wanting to get a state with strategic value
Fighting the enemy, for you, is	1- Fighting for religion OR Jihad	2- Protecting Judaism as my nationality OR nationalist struggle over Arab land	3- Fighting to preserve and develop resources and lands for the sake of future generations
Which motive determines your behavior in this conflict	1- Religion	2- National interests	3- Material interests

Notes: 1. Palestinian citizens of Israel and West Bank Palestinians were presented with the second option where appropriate (e.g. "Koran" as opposed to "Bible" in Question 6). 2. The text was translated to English from the original language (Hebrew/Arabic). 3. The terms "religious," "nationalist" and "material" did not appear in the actual survey but are presented here to clarify how responses were coded

sufficiently high to warrant testing for discriminant validity between them. Other indexes are also potentially relevant, namely, those measuring threat perceptions and political tolerance versus political exclusion. These scales relate to relationships between different groups, especially groups living in conflict.

We therefore constructed a survey questionnaire comprised of the proposed conflict perception scale and six validated scales (described in the Method subsection later), including willingness to compromise, militancy and exposure to violence. We chose these particular scales following DeVellis' (2003) steps for validating a scale and in accordance with common guidelines regarding the relationship between the type of conflict and these variables (Caplan, 2009; Dowty, 2007; Tessler, 2009). Discriminant validity is demonstrated if three conditions hold. First, the correlation between the proposed scale and the validated scales must be strong and significant, but not higher than $r = 0.9$ (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1991). A correlation higher than this suggests that the scales suffer from multicollinearity, meaning that they measure the same phenomenon rather than distinct phenomena (Churchill, 1979; Halperin, 2007). Second, each validated scale must have a strong correlation with the items in the proposed scale. Finally, all of the variables in the proposed scale must display a significant positive correlation with the validated scales, and each type of conflict perception must be clearly related to a validated scale.

4.1 Method

Validating the scale requires the use of another method. In this context, the most suitable method is a survey. Next, we describe the details of the survey including the indicators we used and the study's population. Then, we present and analyze the results.

4.1.1 Measures. *Conflict perception* was measured using the proposed conflict perception scale. As described earlier, the scale included 15 questions or partial statements with three possible responses. The participants were asked to choose the response that reflects their dominant perception of the conflict with respect to that item (Table II). A respondent is considered to have a dominant national, religious or material perception of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict if one of those categories appears in at least 60 per cent of the responses. As noted previously, we also provided the respondents with free space to add their comments or notes on items they regarded as problematic. A number of questions and arguments used language such as “In your opinion, the Middle East conflict is a [. . .]” and “The one issue (in the conflict) you would not compromise on is [. . .]” and questions such as “When, in your opinion, will the conflict end?” (Table II).

To measure *attitudes toward and willingness to compromise*, we used the scale developed and used by the Israel Democracy Institute (2006) and with a few adjustments, that of Canetti-Nisim *et al.* (2009). The result was a seven-item scale that asks respondents the extent to which they agree with proposed resolutions to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 6 = “strongly agree”.

Militancy was measured based on a scale proposed by Huddy *et al.* (2002). The scale consists of four questions regarding how to behave toward the opposing side in a war or conflict. Responses were given on a six-point Likert scale, where 1 = “strongly disagree” and 6 = “strongly agree”.

Assessments of *exposure to violence and conflict* were made using a scale developed by Ennis *et al.* (2000) and modified for the Israeli context. Exposure to conflict is generally defined as exposure to violence, terror, suffering and/or trauma caused by the existence of conflict. For instance, exposure occurs when a person is involved in a life-threatening event, witnesses a substantial threat to another person's life, learns that a person close to him or her was in danger or experiences a constant feeling of terror because of the conflict.

Respondents answered on a six-point Likert scale, where 1= “strongly disagree” and 6= “strongly agree”.

Political tolerance was measured using a scale adapted from [Shamir and Sagiv-Schifter \(2006\)](#) for the Israeli context. The scale measures the tolerance Palestinian Arabs have for Jews and vice versa.

We assessed *political exclusion* using a measure based on the exclusionism scale developed by [Scheepers et al. \(2002\)](#). Their original scale included five statements to which respondents indicated their degree of agreement on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1= “strongly disagree” to 6 = “strongly agree”.

We also collected information on six *demographic and socio-political variables*: age, gender, religion, marital status, income and education.

4.1.2 Sample and procedure. The sample consisted of 411 participants, of whom 138 were Palestinians from the West Bank, 124 were Palestinians from Israel and 149 were Israeli Jews. Most of the Israeli participants, both Jewish and Palestinian, were students at the University of Haifa or Tel Aviv University, whereas the West Bank participants included 98 students from the Arab American University of Jenin and 40 students from An-Najah National University in Nablus. These universities were chosen due to their size and relative diversity of their student body in terms of religiosity, political affiliations and geographical background. Importantly, studies have found a high level of correspondence between student samples and the general population ([Sears, 1993](#)), and student samples are frequently used in social science research ([Altemeyer, 1996](#); [Butler, 2013](#); [Canetti-Nisim, 2004](#); [Feldman, 2003](#); [Shaffer and Duckitt, 2013](#)). Although student surveys may be criticized for not being representative of the adult population, multiple studies have demonstrated that student samples produce similar trends to those found in the general population ([Altemeyer, 1996](#); [Druckman and Kam, 2009](#); [Mullinix et al., 2015](#)).

We administrated the survey between September 29 and October 9, 2013. Research assistants fluent in Hebrew or Arabic stopped passersby randomly on the four campuses and asked them to complete the questionnaire, which was available in Hebrew and Arabic and which took about 20 min to complete. Besides responding to all of the questions from the options given, we asked the participants to handwrite notes and comments next to questions in the conflict perception scale that they viewed as problematic. The interviewers logged verbal notes and comments in addition to the handwritten ones.

The sample was about 60 per cent Muslim and 36 per cent Jewish, with the others being Christian or Druze. Women made up 54 per cent of the sample and men 46 per cent, and the average age was approximately 26. In terms of income, 23 per cent of the participants reported an average monthly income (~\$850 in the West Bank; ~\$2,500 in Israel), 17 per cent had an income a little below the average, 20 per cent were much below the average, 28 per cent were above the average and 12 per cent were much above the average.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 Scale validation. All of the respondents took the opportunity to write comments next to items they viewed as problematic while they were filling out the questionnaire (or commented on these items orally to the interviewers, who then wrote down their comments). Processing these comments revealed that three items raised particular concerns. These were Question 9, “It’s important to maintain the borders of [. . .]”; Question 10, “For you, which is more upsetting?”; and Question 12, “When, in your opinion, will the conflict end?” (The three possible responses for each question appear in [Table II](#).) With this in mind, we embarked upon the statistical analysis of the data.

According to DeVellis' (1991) recommendations, to produce a reliable and validated scale, all items should have a reasonable variance level and a mean close to the center. In the current case, all of the responses are nominal, so means and standard deviations are not applicable. Apart from this, to demonstrate the internal consistency of the scale, correlations between the items should be no less than 0.4 (Hinkin, 1998). We therefore used multiple correspondence analysis, which is used to detect underlying structures in a data set, to calculate the correlations between each item and a cluster representing the other items in the scale. The overall results produced a high Cronbach's alpha of 0.91, indicating internal consistency. The intercorrelations for the specific items appear in Table III, where they are shown for each sampled group separately and for the sample as a whole. Only Questions 4, 7, 8, 10, 11, 14 and 15 produced intercorrelations of 0.4 or above, so only these seven items were validated. Accordingly, the seven validated items comprise one scale for measuring conflict perception (Hinkin, 1998; Oreg, 2003).

Due to the fact that Question 10 was validated in the analysis, we retained it for consideration in the first draft version of the scale, despite the concerns the respondents raised regarding it. However, looking more closely at the results, we can see that only five of the seven validated items display strong intercorrelations, meaning correlations higher than 0.62 for the sample as a whole. These are Questions 4, 7, 8, 14 and 15 (Table III). These five items were thus retained for the final version of the scale.

Table IV shows the intercorrelations between each of the questions in the final scale and their significance. All of the questions strongly correlate. Furthermore, the correlations are significant, meaning that these questions represent the same content domain and are related to each other. These results indicate that to measure conflict perception, we need to use these five questions, which measure the same concept and have the same tendency during the measurement (Table V).

The distribution of the responses between national, religious and material conflict perceptions suggests that the national and material categories are more closely related to

Question\Statement	All groups combined	Palestinians from the West Bank	Palestinians from Israel	Israeli Jews
The Middle East conflict is a	0.35	0.35	0.48	0.34
The issue of "Al-Quds" Jerusalem concerns	0.19	0.31	0.18	0.06
The issue of the land is significant it is	0.30	0.29	0.41	0.32
Vision for this land?	0.60	0.41	0.63	0.51
Who are the sides in this conflict?	0.21	0.39	0.38	0.10
To you, the land of Palestine Israel is:	0.32	0.33	0.38	0.39
The one issue you will not compromise on	0.55	0.30	0.33	0.36
What character should the country have in the future?	0.62	0.41	0.69	0.72
It's important to maintain the borders of	0.34	0.02	0.42	0.41
For you who is more upsetting?	0.45	0.21	0.24	0.36
Once peace is achieved, do you support establishing economic and social ties between the two nations?	0.54	0.07	0.58	0.50
When, in your opinion, will the conflict end?	0.38	0.25	0.35	0.31
The settlement immigration of Jews in the early twentieth century was motivated by	0.43	0.17	0.33	0.18
Fighting the enemy, for you, is	0.66	0.33	0.68	0.53
Which motive determines your behavior in this conflict	0.65	0.22	0.66	0.50
Variance (%)	44.29	27.42	45.28	37.62

Table III.
Intercorrelations of items in the full scale for each group

each other than to the religious conflict category, although they are also distinguishable from one another. From this we can deduce that a respondent who chooses the national conflict response to one question is likely to choose the material conflict response for another but not likely to select the religious conflict response.

Another condition for validation is finding a significant and strong – but not too strong – correlation between the tested scale and the other validated scales. To test these correlations, we used a χ^2 test using the final, five-item version of the conflict perception scale. Two common values are used to measure correlation between nominal variables: the phi coefficient and Cramer’s V. Given that the conflict perception scale is nominal and the other scales examined are ordinal, and as the conflict perception scale has three categories, we used Cramer’s V.

The results of these analyses support the discriminant validity of the conflict perception scale. Specifically, for the willingness to reconcile scale, the results show a correlation of 0.42, which means that there is a relationship between conflict perception and willingness to reconcile. Furthermore, an in-depth examination of the results shows that perceiving the conflict as religious is correlated with a lack of willingness to reconcile – one that is strong but not so strong (i.e. $r > 0.9$) as to suggest that the scales measure the same construct (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1991). The correlation is significant, $p < 0.001$. For the militancy scale, the correlation is 0.35 ($p < 0.001$), and for the exposure to violence and conflict, it is 0.3 ($p < 0.001$), meaning that a high level of militancy and exposure to conflict are correlated with conflict perception. Finally, for the threat perception and political tolerance/exclusion scale, the correlations were not significant. Thus, threat perceptions and political tolerance/exclusion scales do not have a significant correlation with the suggested scale of conflict perception and cannot validate the scale. Conversely, the scales measuring the willingness to reconcile, militancy and exposure to violence/conflict showed a significant correlation with the new scale and therefore support its validation. The results also show that religiosity is correlated positively with conflict perception (0.25, $p < 0.01$ for the Palestinians in the West Bank; 0.43, $p < 0.001$ for both the Palestinians and Jews in Israel). In other words, a higher

Table IV.
Intercorrelations for the five items in the final scale

Item	Intercorrelations for all groups together
<i>Question 4</i> What is your vision for this land?	0.70
<i>Question 7</i> The one issue you will not compromise on is:	0.62
<i>Question 8</i> What character should the country have in the future?	0.70
<i>Question 14</i> Fighting the enemy, for you, is	0.69
<i>Question 15</i> Which motive determines your behavior in this conflict?	0.73
Variance (%)	69.29

Table V.
Correlations and significance for the final scale

Item	Item 4	Item 7	Item 8	Item 14	Item 15
Item 4 What is your vision for this land?	1				
Item 7 The one issue you will not compromise on is:	0.52***	1			
Item 8 What character should the country have in the future?	0.73***	0.57***	1		
Item 14 Fighting the enemy, for you, is	0.61***	0.59***	0.55***	1	
Item 15 Which motive determines your behavior in this conflict	0.63***	0.61***	0.62***	0.69***	1

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

level of religiosity is correlated with seeing the conflict as religious in nature. In addition, political party affiliation correlated positively with the suggested scale (0.38, $p < 0.01$ for the Palestinians in the West Bank; 0.5, $p < 0.001$ for the Palestinians; and 0.54, $p < 0.001$ for the Jews in Israel). As none of these correlations is above 0.9, none of these measurements risks multicollinearity. Therefore, we can conclude that the five-item conflict perception scale is validated for use in the measurement of conflict perception. The previous results also demonstrate that conflict perception may increase or decrease (depending on the kind of conflict perception) the willingness to reconcile, militancy and exposure to violence and conflict.

4.2.1.1 Survey results: perceptions of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The main goal of this article was to define and validate the concept of “conflict perception” and conducting the survey in Phase 3 served this purpose. However, the survey also revealed interesting results with implications for the utility of the newly developed scale. Our findings suggest that Israeli Jews, Palestinians from Israel and Palestinians from the West Bank all tend to perceive the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in different ways. Among the West Bank Palestinians, a large majority – 73 per cent – consider the Israeli–Palestinian conflict to be essentially religious, whereas 22 per cent perceive it as a national conflict, and only 5 per cent regard it as a material conflict. Among the Palestinians from Israel, a plurality (48 per cent) perceive the conflict as religious, 22 per cent see it as national and 21 per cent regard it as material. However, among the Israeli Jews, 56 per cent perceive the conflict as essentially national, 40 per cent see it as material and just 4 per cent regard the conflict as essentially religious in nature. When we examined the answers, we found that less than 10 per cent in each group perceived the conflict as religious and national at the same time, less than 10 per cent perceived it as national and material and less than 5 per cent perceived the conflict as material and religious.

Linking the results of the survey to the results of the focus groups, we found that among the Palestinians, the religious perception is the dominant one. Indeed, among the Palestinians, Jerusalem (especially the Al Aqsa mosque) was ranked as the most important issue, with 54 per cent prevalence. Conversely, Jerusalem was ranked as the most important issue among only less than 30 per cent of the Jews. This result (especially that most of the Palestinians perceive the conflict as religious) indicates the importance of Jerusalem among the people in Palestine and Israel.

5. General discussion and conclusion

How and in what way is it possible to define and measure the concept of “conflict perception”? Following the eight-step process outlined by DeVellis (1991) and using both qualitative (focus groups and interviews) and quantitative (surveys) methodologies, we produced a definition and a five-item scale with strong internal and external reliability.

The definition of conflict perception that emerged from this study is as follows: “An individual’s subjective view regarding the essence of the conflict and its core issues, the identities of the parties involved, and their motivations.” More broadly, a conflict perception is an opinion, differing from one person to the next, about the motivations that lie at the heart of a given protracted conflict, and specifically, whether these motivations are essentially material, religious or nationalist. The measure we constructed and validated produced a new scale, composed of five questions, that allows us to identify the most dominant perception of the conflict for the respondent. In other words, although individuals involved in a conflict may recognize the role played by material and various kinds of symbolic and ideological considerations, they often regard only one set of issues (material, religious or nationalist) as central to the conflict – and therefore, the one that must be dealt

with, if the conflict is to be resolved. Our results also suggest that understanding the conflict is not necessarily related to an objective (often unified) classification offered by scholars, but in the way in which the parties in the conflict and mainly individuals perceive it.

The results show that there are incompatible perceptions about the conflict between the Palestinians and the Jews in Israel. Whereas the Palestinians regard the conflict as religious, Jews in Israel see it as material and national. The results suggest that these differences in perceiving the conflict affect the relative militancy and willingness to reconcile of the different groups. They also show that reconciliation is easier to achieve when the dominant perception of the conflict is material rather than religious. These results are important because scholars have tried to classify conflicts theoretically and suggest corresponding ways for reconciling them (Caplan, 2009; Dowty, 2007; Tessler, 2009).

Our definition and scale contribute to the theoretical and empirical literature in several ways. First, we define and develop the concept of conflict perception and demonstrate how it is different from existing concepts in the literature. Second, we use a careful mixed-methods design to develop and validate a scale for measuring conflict perception. This scale, which was tested in diverse groups living in the shadow of a particular protracted conflict, can be adapted to other such conflicts throughout the world (contingent on the contextual adjustment of the specific elements of the researched conflict). The current study thus contributes to the field of political psychology, particularly those studies dealing with violent protracted conflicts. It provides a tool for a deeper understanding of theories dealing with conflicts and their resolution. Specifically, the use of the new scale can serve as a departure point for studies examining the impact of personal and psychological perceptions on existing conflicts. For instance, it can be used to empirically examine claims regarding the relationship between conflict perceptions and different constructs, such as identity perceptions and exposure to conflict (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2006). In doing so it can help clarify the role of various political and psychological factors in perpetuating conflict.

Third, the use of the scale can generate original data about the political reality and the perceptions among the people involved in the conflict, data that can aid those looking for a practical solution to any protracted conflict. For example, our determination that Palestinians on both sides of the Green Line tend to regard the conflict as primarily religious, whereas Israeli Jews tend to see it in national terms, adds an important perspective to the public discourse regarding the essence of this conflict and the possibility of finding a resolution that can be embraced by a substantial majority on both sides. Our results echo a number of surveys indicating the tendency of the Palestinian side of the conflict to regard the conflict as religious (Polisar, 2015). The implication is that scholars and decision-makers need to pay more attention to religious aspects to resolve the conflict, and perhaps use religious elements as a basis for dialogue and perception (Molloy and Lavie, 2001). This study also implies that the conflict perception of one party to the conflict is not necessarily congruent with the beliefs of the other (Bar-Tal, 1990). Thus, the study also helps break through the barriers to communication promulgated by political parties, public figures and various movements on both sides that frequently portray the conflict in a certain light that does not necessarily reflect how the public perceives it.

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict offers sufficient evidence that if we fail to encourage people on both sides to change entrenched and polarizing attitudes, waves of violence will continue to take their psychological and political toll. This new construct of conflict perception can serve as an essential tool both for coping with the implications of protracted violent conflict and as a catalyst for policy change. The new conceptualization and measurement of conflict perception will lead to a more accurate classification of conflicts, and therefore to more precise, tailor-made formulas for their resolution.

Finally, the new scale is unique in that it is based on empirical evidence from all parties to the conflict, thereby representing diversity in cultural background, and relative economic and violent capacities. These attributes ensure a rich and balanced measurement tool with broad applicability beyond the case studied here.

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