

# Hamas or Palestine? The Discursive Battle over the 2023 Israel-Hamas War and the Global Distribution of Partisan Search Interest

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**Abstract:** This study charts the discursive conflict over the 2023 Israel-Hamas War and estimate the global distribution partisan discourse in the initial month of the War. With the help of international X (Twitter) trends data, we identify two ideal types of pro-Palestine discourses, namely, a “humanitarian” kind focusing on “Palestine-the-victim” popular in a large portion of the world including the West and a “radical” kind broadly supported in the Muslim World characterized by an attention to “Palestine-the-hero”. Pro-Israel hashtag activism, on the other hand, paid overwhelming attention to Hamas with moral blame as the dominant emotive theme. Building on the finding that the topical foci between Palestine/Gaza and Hamas robustly discriminate pro-Israel and pro-Palestine discursive frames, we examine the ratio of Google search volumes between these topics throughout the world, which, unsurprisingly, strongly align with available cross-national opinion polls on the 2023 Israel-Hamas War. Overall interest in the War, the proportion of Muslims, and anti-American sentiment significantly predicted a pro-Palestine skew in online search interest.

Keywords: Israel-Palestine conflict; Discursive frames; October 7; Google Trends; Twitter Trends; Hamas

## 1. Introduction

The 2023 Israel-Hamas War has been widely perceived as a watershed event in international politics, inspiring theoretical discussions across diverse academic disciplines. For researchers of communication, this war was another testament to the salience of media warfare for contemporary armed conflict (Jensen & Ramjee, 2023). Among different types of media warfare, the campaign to influence the opinion of the spectating international public was especially fierce in the current war, with substantial operational and political investments made by governments and civilians on both sides of the conflict.

Traditionally a realm of statecraft, the conduct of public diplomacy has transcended formal politics with the advent of social media (Cervi 2023 & Divon, 2023; Li & Wang, 2010). The rapid advancement of cross-border communication in the internet age has augmented the importance of foreign public opinion (Nye 2008) as more and more people are cognitively exposed to horrible events happening beyond their national borders and empathize with the sufferings of distant others.

Public reputation is a multifaceted concept composed of various traits including power, wealth, and relevance, to name a few. The most consequential component, however, is the perception of “good” since it crucially determines spectators’ partisan sympathies in international or interethnic conflict (Cull, 2019; 2022). The importance of the moral and emotive side of reputation is

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perhaps even more heightened in times of acute military conflict as images of harm and violence take center stage of public attention. Claims of victimhood and accusations of atrocities perpetrated by the opposing side—a recurring pattern in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Caplan, 2012; Smulders, 2013)—seek to influence public perception of good/bad and ultimately partisan sympathies in intergroup conflict or war.

This study seeks to study the development and distribution of public sentiment about the War in its initial month with special attention to emotive judgments and political partisanship. There are two major methods for approaching this topic. The first, used in polls and surveys, studies public sentiments by proactively asking individuals about their feelings, inclinations, or sympathies regarding the conflict, with each individual opinion carrying equal weight regardless of communicative activity. The second studies records of individuals' communicative acts of expressing or gathering information and uses them to trace *discursive* manifestations of political partisanship. This paper proceeds along the latter path, although we also make occasional comparisons with the former.

The following sections are structured as follows. Section 2 will present our basic theoretical tool for schematizing and comparing competing discourses about the War. Section 3 describes our data and methods. Section 4 examines the global of hashtag activism on X (formerly Twitter) and identifies three basic types of frames that undergird pro-Palestine and pro-Israel discourses about the War. Section 5 uses the results from the previous section to estimate the partisan skew in people's online search activities around the world. Section 6 uses regression analysis to look for sociodemographic predictors of our search-based metric of discursive skew estimated in Section 5. Section 7 concludes the paper with a summary.

## **2. A theoretical framework of partisan discourses about wars**

To analyze political conflict through records of political discourses, it is useful to have a theoretical framework for reifying them into a small number of schematized types. A particularly influential approach comes from narrative theory, which reifies political or historical discourses by structural features of the latent “plot” detached from spatiotemporal particularities (Kuusisto, 2020; Wertsch, 2008; White, 1973). Such purely structural abstractions have been used to compare historical or political narratives across time within the same national community based on the observation that narratological forms tend to reproduce themselves through historical memory (Alexander, 2012; Wertsch, 2008). However, this approach is unsuitable for studying discursive conflicts about wars since partisanship in wars is based on emotive and moral judgments of *particular* political actors.

We find theoretical promise less in formal or stylistic aspects of discourses and more in their characteristic as arguments. Skinner (1988, 274) once stated that “any act of communication always constitutes the taking up of some determinate position in relation to some pre-existing conversation or argument.” The same idea can be and has been applied to more complex forms of communication such as historical narratives. Kuukkanen (2015) interpreted historiography neither as holistic representations of the past nor as literary constructs whose essence resides in the form but as “arguments” that build on preexisting “argumentative contexts.” In political

communication and IR, the ubiquitous concept of “frame” (Entman, 1993) closely captures the notion of “arguments” just described.

What, then, are the argumentative contexts or ‘frame contestation’ that ground competing political discourses about wars? Scholars of international conflict discourse have used different analytical categories or tools for schematizing frames (Curran & Gibson, 2020; Yang and Chen 2019). For our study, we focus on the observation that the performative function of partisan discourse about wars often comes down to serving judgments about the roles and actions of specific agents, that is, judgments about “who did what.” This is just a logical consequence of the fact that wars are essentially interactions between political actors, and disputes about wars are disputes about the nature of those interactions. Accordingly, we may schematize any political understanding of a certain war using what we will call a “character-role summary,” composed of a set of political entities or “characters” involved in the war together with the roles they play.

As complex social events, wars involve a very large number of political organizations that exist on numerous and overlapping levels of social aggregation. For analytical utility, we need an additional step of abstraction that leaves only the most important characters and roles, something that we will refer to as the *base script*. As a highly condensed form of a character-role summary, base scripts define the broad political “camps” or “positions” about a certain war and largely captures the issues of causation and moral judgment proposed by Entman (1993) as components of discursive frames (Yang and Chen 2020, p.396). Communicative acts of various lengths, forms, tones, and topical foci semantically imply and performatively refer to base scripts as a subtext, similar to how works of historiography refer to their “argumentative contexts” (Kuukkanen, 2015).

How does the abstraction of character-role summaries into their most condensed form—the base script—come about? Partisan views differ in the ontological and political “weight” that they attach to various character-role dyads, which often—although not necessarily—results in base scripts that not only differ in the assignment of roles to different characters but also the list of the most important characters. Causal significance is an obvious determinant of such a weight, such that actors whose actions made a salient impact on the war are considered more central to the event. However, more fundamentally, weight is also determined by evaluations of political significance defined amidst competing attempts to legitimize or delegitimize certain political actors.

For example, pro-DPR Korean accounts of the Korean War—popularly expressed in North Korean and radical Third-Worldist texts (Abrams, 2020)—rarely feature the Republic of Korea (RoK) or its armed forces as an important player in the war contrary to South Korean and most Western accounts that deem it as one of the main protagonists. This is because of the political understanding that views it as a “stooge” of another character with undisputed centrality, namely, the United States (i.e., low political significance). The appearance or suppression of the Republic of Korea in the competing base scripts arises from a fundamental disagreement about the political and ontological “weight” of different characters involved in the war and forms a major point of contention between partisan discourses about the Korean War.

In principle, there is no theoretical restriction on the kind of roles that may be assigned to characters. In practice, Mutua's (2001) influential "Savage-Victim-Savior" (SVS) rubric provides a common set of roles that can be readily integrated into base scripts defined within the character-role summary of partisan discourses. The SVS was first proposed in the context of human rights discourses and was most extensively applied in this domain (Brooten et al., 2015; Song, 2021), but it is also highly suitable for discourses about wars. We make two minor modifications to Mutua's original framework. First, we slightly modify the labels and use the term "hero" instead of "savior." This is because the act of "saving" is just one kind of heroism that presupposes victory or some sort of operational success. Second, we note that the final letter of SVS (or SVH) is optional as not all stories of wars (as well as human rights) have a concrete hero. The SVH framework of roles may therefore be realized in two variants: the "Savage-Victim-Hero" and "Savage-Victim" (SV) (c.f. Song, 2021, p.12).

For base scripts to properly represent political discourse, it must be supplemented with information about *communicative emphasis*. Different character-role dyads in a base script often receive varying levels of emphasis in political communication, and this emphasis determines the topical focus and the emotive attitude of the message. Within the SVH rubric of roles, one may choose to focus on the depravity of the savage with anger and disgust, represent the suffering of the victim with sorrow and consternation, or cheer for the hero in the hope of glory. All three types of sentiments are indeed causally interrelated: In particular, feelings of empathetic sorrow for the victims and indignation towards the perpetrators are sometimes understood as naturally cooccurring (Boltanski, 1999, Section 3.6). While true, this does not mean that such causally related sentiments are always stressed to equal degrees in political communication. Selective emphases are perhaps most clearly visible in political slogans of which brevity commonly forces the choice of a single character-role dyad for spotlight (e.g., #HamasTerrorists; #GazaUnderAttack). Yet, the relevance of communicative emphasis readily extends to more complex and lengthier forms of political communication as is amply attested in studies of news media frames (Curran & Gibson, 2020). The notion of communicative emphasis can therefore be aggregated to entire political communities with a shared base script to represent what "they" talked about the most within a designated temporal boundary, comparable to what some scholars of frames called "issue definition" (Yang and Chen, 2019).

In the next few sections, we will seek to identify broad political camps together with their base scripts and communicative emphases in the global partisan discourse about the 2023 Israel-Hamas War. This task will also help us identify key topics that robustly discriminate the communicative acts of opposing sides, which we will use in later sections to estimate the partisan skew in online search activity across the world.

### **3. Data source and extraction**

The main data sources for the following analyses are international X (Twitter) Trends and geolocated Google search volumes accessed through Google Trends.

Our X Trends data are demi-hourly records of the top 10 trends in 62 countries in the world, retrieved from a third-party data source *Twitter Trending Archive* in mid-November 2023. We

used data from October 6 15:00:00 UTC, around half a day before the outbreak of hostilities, to November 10 14:30:00 UTC (36 days). This resulted in an X Trends dataset with a total of 1,0416,000 trends among which there were 43,932 unique terms.

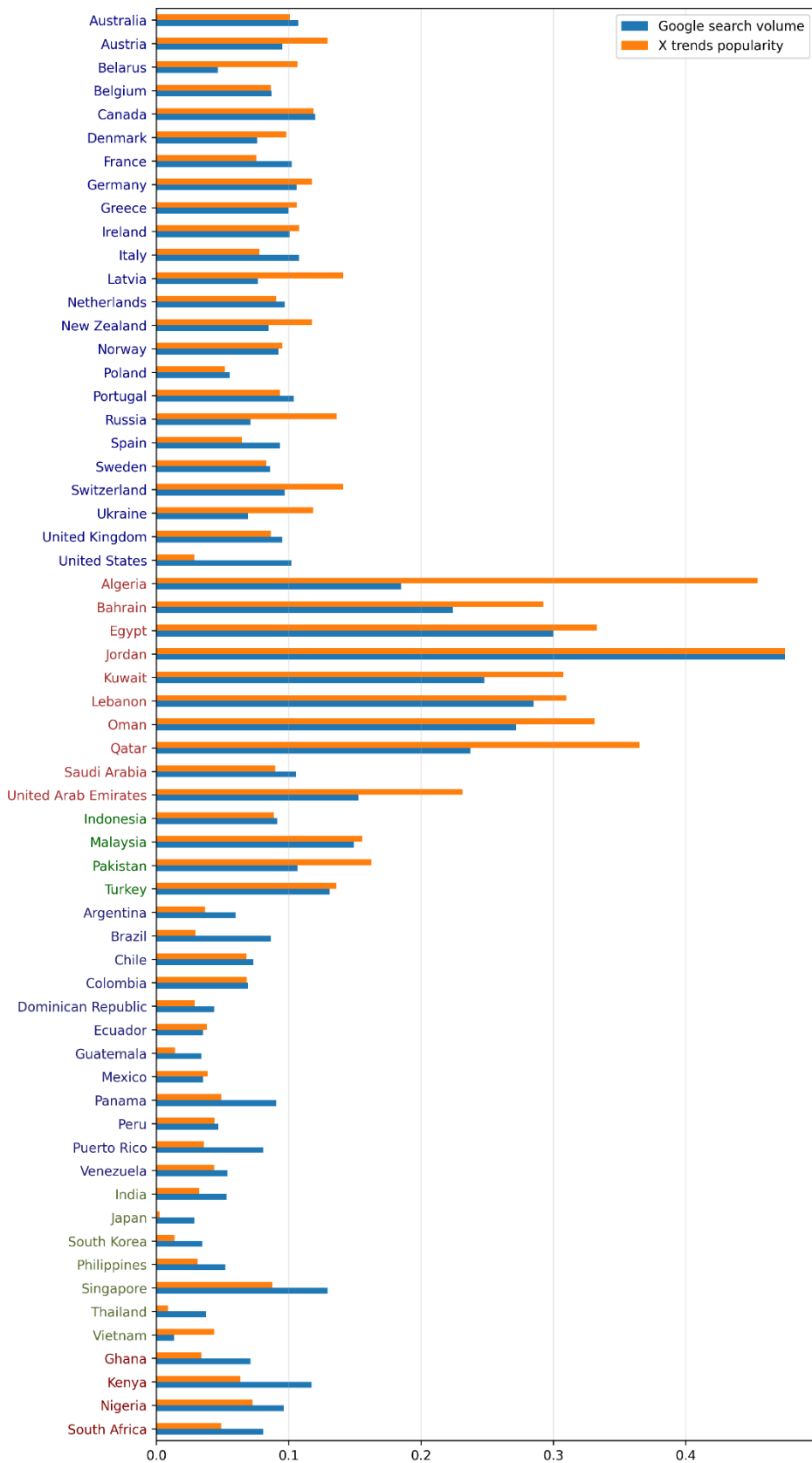
Google Trends allows users to compare the normalized search volumes of two or more search terms or topics from designated locations and time. For example, if the term “ Hamas ” has a scale of 100 in country A on October 15 and a scale of 50 in country B on the same date, then the proportion of search queries containing the term “ Hamas ” in country A was twice the proportion of search queries containing this term in country B on that date (Google does not disclose absolute proportions). Google Trends allows users to query search frequencies of “ terms ” or “ topics , ” the latter of which are sets of terms in any language classified by Google as expressing the same concept. All analysis of Google search volumes in this paper reply on “ topics ” for cross-linguistic comparability. Google Trends uses *samples* to compare normalized search volumes, and we have noticed that repeated queries on Google Trends do not always report perfectly identical estimates. Yet, differences were very minor in our trials and did not alter any of the results in an important way.

In the absence of major newsworthy events, the search volumes for topics or terms related to the Israel-Palestine conflict remain very low, sporadic, and often appear as zero on Google Trends. Even in previous armed conflicts between Israel and Hamas such as the 12-day war in 2021, search volumes for various related topics spiked in a “ blip ” for a couple of days and quickly subsided in most countries. The 2023 War, exceptional in the level of global sensation it brought about, offers a rare opportunity to study the Israel-Palestine conflict using Google Trends since all related terms and topics skyrocket in a large part of the world and remain elevated for an extended duration.

#### **4. A global analysis of X Trends**

Figure 1 visualizes the geographic distribution of overall interest in the War, operationalized as the proportion of trends in our country-demarcated X Trends data that are relevant to the 2023 War. For comparison, we present this metric side-by-side with the level of interest reflected in Google search volumes over the same period, operationalized as the sum of the search topics “ Israel ”, “ Hamas ”, “ Gaza Strip ”, and “ Palestine ” (See Online Supplement 1 for details). The Google-based metric of interest is re-scaled so that its highest point equals the highest point of the X-based metric of interest, both of which pertain to the country of Jordan. The two measures of interest showed a strong correlation at 0.89.

**Fig 1. Overall interest in the 2023 Israel-Hamas War by country, measured with X and Google**

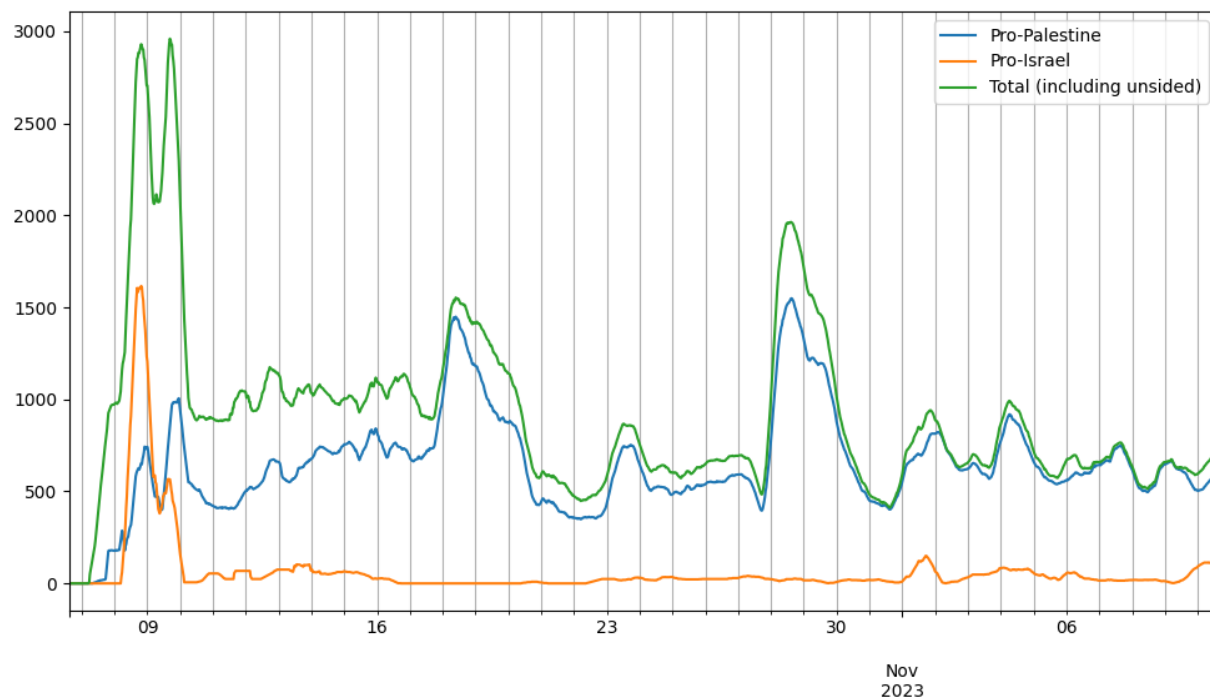


Some trends

on X—around 32.7 percent of our data—are hashtags. The vast majority of trending hashtags related to the War had a ‘slogan-like’ character (Alamán, 2020) that allowed us to classify them into broadly pro-Palestine and pro-Israel positions. Among 13,620 unique hashtags in our dataset, we identified 400 unique hashtags closely related to the War, among which 308 we classified as pro-Palestine and 41 as pro-Israel. Online Supplement S2 contains the list of all unique terms and hashtags in our X trends data together with their frequencies and our coding decisions.

Figure 2 visualizes the chronological trajectory of the volume of pro-Israel and pro-Palestine hashtags in our cross-national dataset. Two observations stand out. First, the volume of pro-Israel trending hashtags soared in first the three to four days of the war when Israel suddenly came under attack but remained marginalized throughout the conflict. Second, pro-Palestine trending hashtags were slower to take off but remained steady and dominant throughout the period. The two “bumps” in the volume of pro-Palestine trending hashtags were both triggered by a major escalation from the IDF, namely, the explosion in Al-Ahly Hospital and the onset of the IDF’s ground invasion of Gaza. Both observations reinforce the recurrent observation in international politics that the exercise of hard power often compromises reputation among foreign publics (Cull, 2022; Oppenheimer, 2023).

**Fig 2. Chronological trajectory of partisan hashtags**



What concrete messages, then, were being communicated in partisan hashtags? We grouped unique hashtags by substantive meaning regardless of language and spelling and then classified these “hashtag groups” into three types: English-language-majority pro-Palestine hashtag groups, Arabic-language-majority pro-Palestine hashtag groups, and pro-Israel hashtag groups. The latter was not further divided by dominant language since all non-trivial hashtag groups belonging to

this category were English majority. There were no internationally popular hashtag groups relevant to the War composed predominantly of hashtags written in a language other than English or Arabic.

Qualitative coding of hashtag groups revealed five basic codes that we labeled ‘blame,’ ‘victimhood,’ ‘heroism,’ ‘urging aid and action,’ and ‘expressing support.’ The first three codes directly correspond to SVH, respectively. ‘Urging aid and action’ is closely related to the role of victim, since such urges can only be motivated by the suffering of the victims. The last code of merely ‘expressing support’ does not by itself imply any particular role.

Table I presents the seven most popular hashtag groups in each of the three categories together with their codes and geographical distribution. The column for geographic distribution was omitted for Arabic-language-majority pro-Palestine hashtag groups since their scope was always limited to MENA, and all popular hashtag groups in this category trended in nearly all Arab countries. Online Supplement S3 contains detailed visualizations of the geographic and temporal distribution of all 21 hashtag groups presented in Table I.

**Table I. Most widely trending hashtag groups and their emotive attitudes**

Pro-Palestine Hashtag groups (English majority)		Pro-Palestine Hashtag groups (Arabic majority)	Pro-Israel Hashtag groups	
Hashtags	Distribution	Hashtags	Hashtags	Distribution
<b><i>Victimhood</i></b> #PalestineGenocide (1607) #palestiniangenocide (82) #Gazagenocide (1114) #GazaGenocide (522) #Gaza_Genocide (338) #GazaGenocides (61) #Genocide_in_Gaza (43) #GenocidioEnGaza (41)	MENA and West	<b><i>Heroism</i></b> طوفان_الاقصى# (1631) طوفان_القدس# (923) طوفان_الاقصى# (878) طوفان_الاقصى# (176) طوفان_الاقصى# (146) #AksaTufan (35) [EN: Al-Aqsa Flood]	<b><i>Blame</i></b> #Hamais_ISIS (279) #HamasisISIS (231) #HamasisISIS (184) #HamaisISIS (104) (48) حماس_هي_داعش#	Mainly Israel with scattered appearances in other parts of the world.
<b><i>Victimhood</i></b> #GazaUnderAttack (1302) #PalestineUnderAttack (335) #GazzeUnderAttack (321) #GazaUnderaAttack (189) #Gaza_under_attack (134) غزه_تحت_القصف# (1371)	Near-simultaneous global distribution in the initial days of the war, trends longest in MENA.	<b><i>Heroism</i></b> غزه_تنتصر# (1805) (1109) غزه_تقاوم_وستنتصر# فلسطين_تنتصر# (738) [EN: Gaza / Palestine is victorious]	<b><i>Blame</i></b> #HamaisTerrorists (714) #HamaisTerrorrists (69) #HamaisTerrorist (51)	Trends in most countries including some countries in MENA in the first couple of days of the War. Persists only in Israel.



<b><i>Urging aid and action</i></b> #CeasefireNOW (2457) #CeasefireForGazaNOW (550) #CeaseFireInGaza (405) #CeasefireForGaza (183) #Ceszezlefeu (26)	Global distribution but relatively <i>unpopular</i> in MENA.	<b><i>Victimhood / Urging aid and action</i></b> غزه_تستغيث# (1863) [EN: Gaza is crying for help]	<b><i>Expressing Support</i></b> #IraniansStandWithIsrael (808)	Trends in most countries including some countries in MENA in the first couple of days of the War and disappears.
<b><i>Victimhood</i></b> #GazaHospital (798) #hospital (320) لا_لقصف_مستشفيات_غزه# (100) مجزره_مستشفى_المعداني# #StopBombingHospitals (86) مستشفى_الشفاء# (516) مستشفى_القدس# (321)	Trends globally following the bombing of Al-Ahly hospital on Oct 17, 2023.	<b><i>Heroism</i></b> غزه_العزه# (1844) [EN: Gaza the prideful; Arabic rhyme between Gaza and “Azza” (pride)]	<b><i>Blame</i></b> #hamasattack (765)	Trends in most countries in the first couple of days of the war and disappears.
<b><i>Urging aid and action</i></b> #FreeGaza (846) #FreePalestineNow (574) #FreePalestine (538) #ÖzgürFilistin (25) #FreePalestine_Now (15) #FreePalenstine (220)	Trends in MENA and other Muslim-majority countries with only sporadic appearance in the West.	<b><i>Heroism</i></b> (1465) غزه_تزحف_الي_القدس# [EN: Gaza is marching to Jerusalem]	<b><i>Victimhood</i></b> #Israel_under_attack (598)	Trends in nearly all countries in the first couple of days of the War and disappears.
<b><i>Urging aid and action</i></b> #starlinkforgaza (1478)	Trends in MENA, Western Europe, North America, and South Asia after IDF's ground invasion.	<b><i>Heroism</i></b> (1383) غزه_مقبره_الغزاه# [EN: Gaza is a cemetery for invaders]	<b><i>Victimhood / Urging aid and action</i></b> #BringThemBackHomeNow (86) #BringThemHome (76) #bringthemhome (90)	Israel and Austria
<b><i>Blame</i></b> #IsraelTerrorist (398) #IsraelTerrorists (169) اسرائيل_ارهابيه# (49) #Teröristİsrail (10) #zionistterror (48) #ZionistTerror (30) #zionistterror (31)	Trends almost exclusively in MENA.	<b><i>Victimhood</i></b> غزه_تباد# (887) [EN: Gaza is exterminated]	<b><i>Blame</i></b> #HamazNazis (145)	Trends almost exclusively in Israel

(231) #امريكا_والصهاينة_ارهابيون				
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Note: Numbers in parentheses denote the number of country-demihours for each trending hashtag. Hashtag groups in each category are sorted in descending order of combined country-demihours. Hashtags with less than 10 appearances were omitted from the table.

There were great differences in the relative frequency of the five codes in each category. English-language-majority pro-Palestine hashtag groups were focused on the category of ‘victimhood’ and the closely related category ‘urging aid and action.’ ‘Blame’ was much less common, and ‘heroism’ was virtually nonexistent. In contrast, the most prominent category among Arabic-language-majority pro-Palestine hashtag groups was heroism, expressed in the context of hoping for the victory of the Palestinian resistance. Pro-Israel hashtag groups predominantly focused on blame, with the designated “savage” almost always being Hamas.

The content of trending hashtags allows us to propose three ideal-typical partisan positions—two pro-Palestine and one pro-Israel—together with their underlying base scripts and communicative emphases as shown in Figure 3.

**Fig 3. Proposed base scripts of partisan narratives about the 2023 Israel-Hamas War and their communicative emphases**

Pro-Palestine				Pro-Israel	
C	R	C	R	C	R
<div>Israel</div> <div>Palestine/ Gaza</div>	S	Israel	S	Hamas	S
	V	Palestine/ Gaza	V H	Israel	V H

Note: Character-role dyads marked in bold indicate communicative emphasis. The role of H may be evaluatively envisaged for the pro-Israel base script, but the vast majority of pro-Israel political communication occurred along the S-V script.

The first type of pro-Palestine discourse has an “SV” base script with a strong communicative emphasis on “V” that arises from a *humanitarian* motivation for supporting Palestine. This accounts for mainstream pro-Palestine activism in the West and other non-Muslim majority countries as seen from the contents of English-language-majority pro-Palestine hashtag groups most conspicuously characterized by an absence of messages of heroism and empowerment. The geographic distribution of the “humanitarian” narrative for the Palestinian side of the conflict is also visible in regional variations *among* English-language-majority hashtag groups that convey messages of victimhood or urge aid/action. Most notable is the lackluster performance of

#FreeGaza, #FreePalestine, and cognates in Western and most non-Muslim-majority countries, which suggests a limited commitment to the political project of Palestinian liberation. This comes in stark contrast to the high popularity of hashtags in these regions that call attention to harm or request an immediate cessation of harm.

Third Worldist critiques have sometimes accused Western leftist movements of limiting their sympathies to the *suffering* of colonized peoples while remaining unenthusiastic about collective resistance or empowerment (Losurdo, 2017, p.183). Whatever the moral merits of such critiques are, the descriptive claim is consistent with the content of trending hashtags related to the 2023 Israel-Palestine War in Western countries. However, we also observe that a relative lack of interest in empowering or supporting the Palestinian organized militancy and a primary focus on victimhood and relief was not just a phenomenon of the West but also a much more general tendency of countries outside the Muslim World, which speaks against radical proposals that explain such tendencies by invoking negative cultural or psychological features specific to Western or “imperialist” countries (Losurdo, 2017).

The other ideal type of pro-Palestine discourse is more avowedly political with a dual communicative emphasis on Palestinian heroism and Palestinian victimhood. The image of the heroic guerilla fighter as an ‘alter-ego’ of defeated Palestine is an old feature of Palestinian national historiography (Smulders, 2013) and has been a mainstay in Hama’s public relations (Seo, 2014; Singh, 2012). The pan-Arabic distribution of messages of glory and heroism attests to the *regional* popularity of this narrative in the 2023 War (c.f. Figs pa1, pa2, pa4, pa5, and pa6 in Online Appendix S3), which is also supported by recent polls that show a surge of favorable opinion of Hamas even in Arab countries previously unsympathetic to this organization (Cleveland & Pollock, 2023). This does not mean that the radical type of pro-Palestine discourse is unreceptive to messages of victimhood, which were indeed communicated just as amply. However, this radical type of discourse *does* appear to be unreceptive to some types of urges for aid or action. Notably, the single most globally popular hashtag #CeasefireNow trended surprisingly little in Arab countries and the broader Muslim world likely because it appears to leave aside the political goal of Palestinian liberation.

An important feature of this “radical” branch of pro-Palestine discourse concerns the labeling of the character that is assigned the role of hero. Even though most of the battlefield action is done by Hamas, pro-Palestinian accounts rarely frame the War as a story about Hamas in light of the argumentative context where pro-Israel accounts of the War frequently seek to deny the link between Hamas and Palestine or the Palestinians in an effort to bolster Hamas’ role as the aggressor and refute its role as a hero. Referring back to the issue of political “weight” in the framing and abstraction of political narratives discussed in Section 2, the argumentative context about legitimate representation induced a shifting of weight from Hamas to Palestine or Gaza such that heroism is fundamentally dedicated to the latter even by the people who are most likely to see Hamas as resistance fighters.

The radical branch of pro-Palestine activism can be seen as naturally arising from a strong subjective identification with the Palestinian side of the armed conflict whereby one ceases to be a mere “compassionate witness” (Penttinen 2016) and develops a self-consciousness as a distant

participant in the war. All activist movements standing up for the weaker side of an intergroup relation face a tension between the need to stress victimhood and helplessness to call for intervention and the need to appeal to the latent strength of the subaltern to motivate the struggle from a first-person viewpoint (Allen 1998). This may partly explain the fact that, across the Arab World, messages of hope and glory were almost always expressed in Arabic hashtags while victimhood and urges for aid/action were often communicated by adopting English-language slogans. If we heed the view that “remedy suggestions” are also an important component of discursive frames about intergroup conflict (Yang and Chen, 2019), then the solutions envisaged by radical pro-Palestine discourse were bifurcated between outside arbitration and military victory.

Finally, the content of trending X hashtags indicates that pro-Israel discourses commonly assume a different set of core protagonists in the base script, with “Palestine/Gaza” being replaced by “ Hamas.” Pro-Israel political communication occurred almost entirely along the savage-victim (SV) script with a heavy communication emphasis on the former role. Messages of heroism were virtually absent,<sup>1</sup> which, despite its centrality in Israeli national history (Feige, 2002), may have been unsuitable given the overwhelming power difference between the two sides. Speaking of remedy suggestions, the featuring and highlighting of Hamas as the main antagonist provided the conditions for identifying the eradication of Hamas as the main solution to problem. All in all, the question “Do you condemn Hamas?”, a challenge that has become a popular internet meme in the 2023 War following its use by influential pro-Israel commentators and journalists, appears to be a reasonable caricature of pro-Israel political communication.<sup>2</sup>

## **5. Political partisanship in online search activity**

Our analysis in the previous section suggests that the topical contrast between Palestine/Gaza and Hamas forms the core of pro-Palestine and pro-Israel discursive frames both at the level of base script as well as communicative emphasis. Unsurprisingly, there is a complete absence of Palestine and Gaza among all pro-Israel unique hashtags, and Hamas is also absent in pro-Palestine hashtags trending outside the Arab world. A very small fraction of pro-Palestine hashtags trending in Arab countries contain the term “Hamas” (most importantly حماس\_تمثل\_امه\_الاسلام [EN: #Hamas\_represents\_the\_nation\_of\_Islam] with 383 appearances), but even such hashtags were invoked in context of rejecting popular Israeli talking points that seek to deny the legitimacy of Hamas.

An informal qualitative review of influential pro-Palestine and pro-Israel statements reaffirms the differentiating role of these keywords (e.g., AIPAC, 2023; The White House, 2023). Leaked internal emails from the major Canadian television news network CTV told employees to use “Hamas” over “Palestine” in a strong testament to the deeply partisan character of these two topics (Paling, 2023). Similarly, while most Western-based corporate media commonly used the

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<sup>1</sup> Among trending hashtags in our data, #IsraelFightsBack (10 appearances) and #האור\_ינצח (EN: #The\_light\_will\_win – 2 appearances) expressed sentiments of heroism. The former had an international distribution across multiple Western states.

<sup>2</sup> “Do you condemn Hamas” was added to the website Know Your Meme in October 2023. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/do-you-condemn-hamas>

name ‘Israel-Hamas War,’ Al-Jazeera often used the label ‘Israel-Gaza War.’ Even in Arab countries, the rare instances of pro-Israel texts repeat the heavy topical focus on Hamas (Hamid, 2023a; 2023b). Virtually all sensational events actively communicated by the Israeli side in the first month of the War are about Hamas, starting from the initial violent attack on Israeli civilians on October 7 to the kidnapping of hostages, rapes, the beheading of babies, accusations of tunnels under hospitals, and the discovery of an Arabic copy of *Mein Kampf* from the bodies of dead militants.

In contrast, the statements released by active pro-Palestine organizations, such as Columbia Students for Justice in Palestine (2023), Harvard Palestine Solidarity Groups on the Situation in Palestine (2023), Solidarity with Palestinian Resistance McGill (2023), to name just a few, direct attention to the political issue of Palestine and the dire situation in Gaza without any mention of Hamas. Pro-Palestine slogans of street protests in Western countries are commonly focused on Palestine but virtually never Hamas, even when, for example, politically radical messages glorifying the “Palestinian resistance” are chanted.<sup>3</sup> Such preferences in terminology and topical focus are manifested just as conspicuously in pro-Palestine texts in other regions of the world, as seen, for example, in the official statements from pro-Palestine African governments (Audu and Lawal 2023) or the statements from pro-Palestine protestors in India (Ameerudeen 2023) and South Korea (Korean Civil Society Requesting a Cessation of Israel’s Genocide of Palestine 2023).

Even the pro-Palestinian discourses in Arab countries rarely refer to Hamas despite the popularity of the radical or “heroic” version of pro-Palestine discourse schematized in Section 4. We examined all official statements about the 2023 Israel-Palestine War up to mid-November from the foreign ministries of one resolutely pro-Palestine government (Algeria) and two moderately pro-Palestine governments (Saudi Arabia and Bahrain) in the region, only to find a very familiar style of discourse: Texts that show strong and unequivocal support for Palestine did not talk about Hamas and focused on Palestine and Gaza, while more reserved and moderate statements—released by Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in the early days of the War—also mentioned Hamas attack with far fewer references to the other two topics. See Online Supplement S4 for full details.

Based on the above discussion, we constructed an index by taking the Google search volumes for the topics “Palestine,” “Gaza Strip,” and “Hamas” and computing by what proportion the sum of the first two is larger or smaller than the third. This metric is intended as a relative measure of how much the information-gathering activity about the 2023 Israel-Hamas War from a certain location is skewed toward pro-Palestine or pro-Israel discursive frames. As a side note, the search volume for the topic “Gaza Strip” is significantly lower than “Palestine” with a global average of around 25 percent for our period of interest, and simply using the binary contrast between Palestine and Hamas produces an almost identical scale with a correlation of over 0.99.

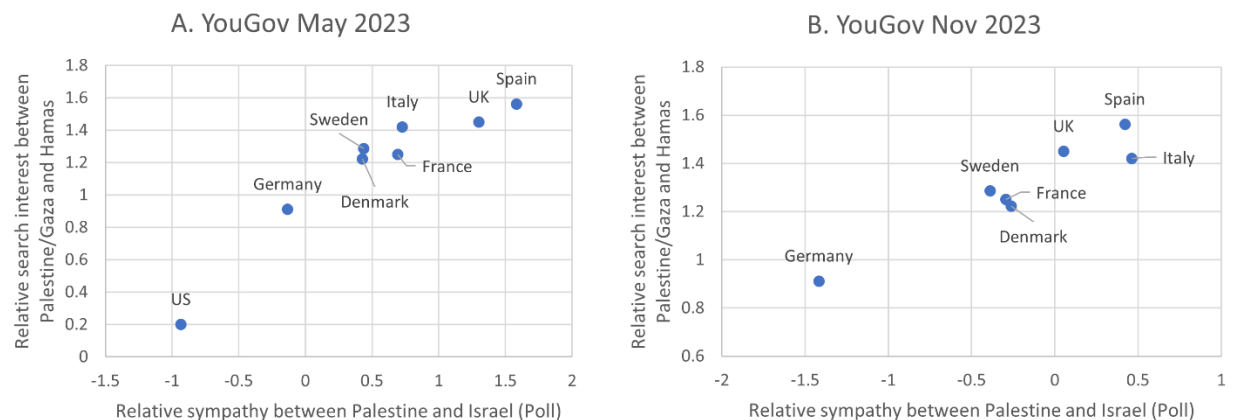
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<sup>3</sup> Some footages can be seen in Bachram (2023) and Quds News Network (2023), the former of which accused the protestors of being “Hamas supporters.”

For better consistency with the content of X trends (Table I) and the base scripts derived from it (Figure 3), we use both Palestine and Gaza in our subsequent presentations.

The discriminating function of the topics Palestine/Gaza and Hamas in the discursive battle over the 2023 War predicts a substantial association between our Google search metric and the results of polls or surveys that ask people for their partisan sympathies in the War. We looked for such polls conducted in recent months across *multiple countries* and found two relevant resources. First, a series of surveys conducted by YouGov.uk in mid-May 2023 and again in mid-November 2023 asked people in seven or eight countries in North America and Europe, “Which side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict do you sympathize with more?”, with possible responses being “the Israeli side,” “the Palestinian side,” “Both sides equally,” and “Not sure” (YouGov plc., 2023a; YouGov plc., 2023b). Figure 4 plots the poll results against our Google-based metric, scaled in the same way. There was a very strong linear relationship between our search-based metric and the poll results with a Pearson correlation of 0.96 for the seven-country November polls and 0.94 for the eight-country May polls (see Online Supplement 5 for the data and calculations).

**Fig 4. YouGov poll results plotted against relative search focus on Palestine/Gaza compared to Hamas**

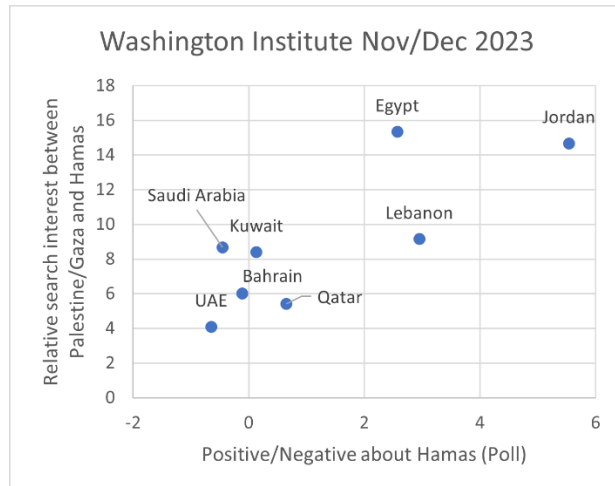


Second, there is the Washington Institute poll conducted in November/December 2023 in eight Arab countries asking people for their opinion of Hamas, with possible responses “very positive,” “somewhat positive,” “somewhat negative,” and “very negative” (Cleveland and Pollock, 2023). While this question does not directly ask for one’s partisan sympathy between Palestine and Israel (framing the question in this way would very likely result in nearly negligible percentages of people who say they sympathize more with Israel in just about any Arab country), it does differentiate countries that are relatively more “moderate” from those whose support is more unconditional. Within the Arab context, this question can be expected to be intimately connected to the degree of affinity to pro-Israel discourses, of which the major component is blaming Hamas.

Combining “very positive” with “somewhat positive” and “very negative” with “somewhat negative,” we scaled the poll results in the same way as our search-based metric. The two metrics are strongly correlated with a Pearson correlation of 0.80 as visualized in Figure 5. As expected,

search interest about the War was *less* focused on Hamas among publics that are *more* sympathetic to it (see Online Supplement 5 for the data and calculations).

**Fig 5. Washington Institute poll results plotted against relative search focus on Palestine/Gaza compared to Hamas**



The lack of suitable international poll data prevents further comparisons, but some anecdotal comparisons can still be made. In India, Jammu and Kashmir has the highest Google search ratio of Palestine/Gaza relative to Hamas in our period of interest, followed by Kerala in second place. Jammu and Kashmir has the highest percentage of Muslims among all Indian states and union territories (apart from the small island territory of Lakshadweep), followed in second place by Kerala (Pew Research Center, 2021), which, apart from having the second highest proportion of Muslims to Hindus among Indian states, is well known for its pro-Palestine inclinations (Ameerudheen, 2023). On the other side of the spectrum, Himachal Pradesh had the lowest search ratio of Palestine/Gaza relative to Hamas. It is hardly surprising that this state has the highest percentage of Hindus and the lowest percentage of Muslims in all of India (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Figure 6 shows the Google search metric for all countries used in our analysis of X trends minus Israel. To account for a heavy right-skew in cross-continental distribution (toward the Palestinian side), we applied a natural logarithmic transformation to our metric while keeping the signs. The “middle” color was set to the value of Denmark, which had roughly comparable levels of sympathies for the Palestinians and Israelis in the May and November YouGov polls of 2023. As expected, the Arab World occupies one end of the scale, with Egypt, Algeria, and Jordan having the highest estimated discursive skew toward Palestine, followed by the wealthy Gulf countries and non-Arab Muslim-majority states. The other pole of the list is more regionally heterogeneous and perhaps less intuitive: Non-Muslim East Asian states, most conspicuously South Korea and Japan but also the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam showed high relative search interest in Hamas, in addition to a few countries in the Americas (US, Brazil, and Argentina) and Sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria and Ghana). By and large, Europe occupied the middle ranges of the global spectrum. Among European countries, Ukraine, Germany, and Austria—countries for

which Israel is highly relevant due to ongoing war or history—had the highest relative search focus on Hamas relative to Palestine/Gaza.

**Fig 6. Geographical distribution of partisan skew in search activity**

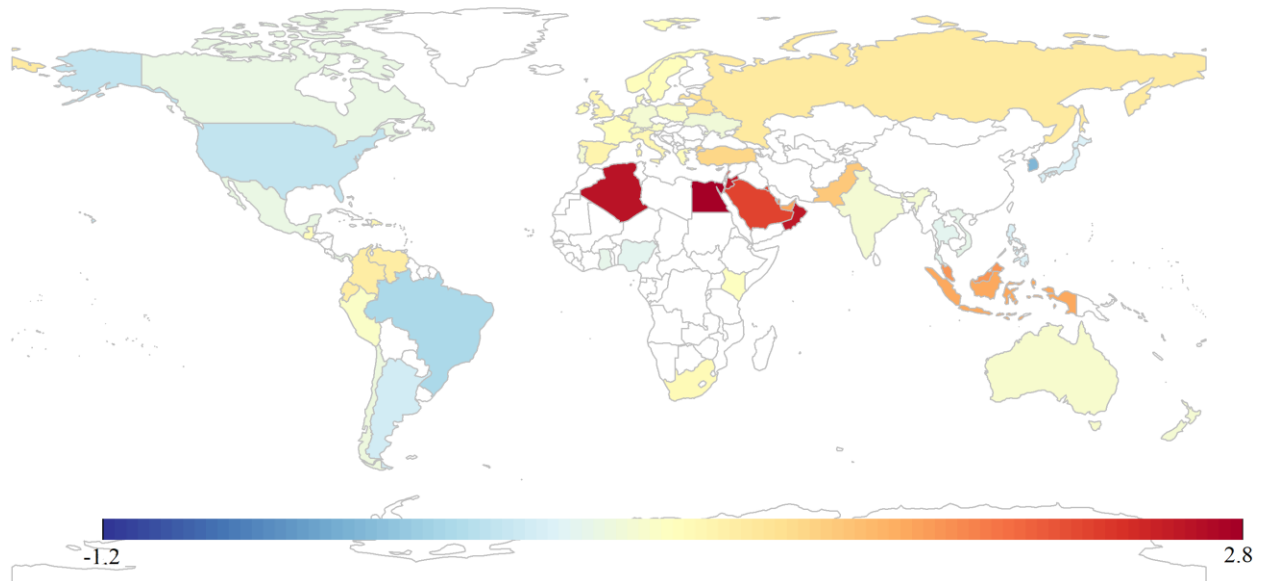
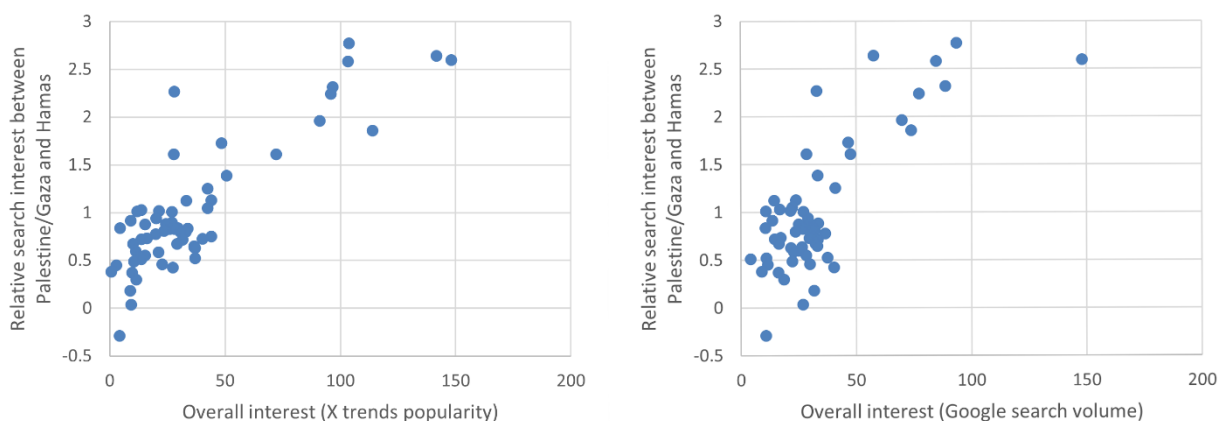


Figure 7 plots countries' overall interest in the War (visualized in Figure 1) against logged estimates of discursive partisan skew in online search activity. A positive correlation emerges regardless of whether overall interest is measured through the frequency of relevant trends on X ( $r=0.856$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) or the combined search volume of major keywords on Google ( $r=0.783$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), although the pattern appears a bit more clearly in the former case.

**Fig 7. Overall interest in the 2023 Israel-Hamas War and estimated partisan skew in search activity**



We propose two preliminary hypotheses with alternative implications for the direction of causality to account for this correlation. On the one hand, causality may flow from partisan sentiment to the volume of interest. Images of harm most likely work as an important catalyst for people's interest in distant wars, and the disproportionate level of harm inflicted on the



Palestinian side of the conflict may have induced people with pro-Palestine inclinations to become more cognitively and communicatively engaged in the event.

However, it is also possible that the overall level of interest in the War may have caused how the War is framed in public discourse. The main reasoning for this is that the potential acceptance of less resourceful political discourses requires a certain level of cognitive effort. Specifically, formal media in countries with low levels of interest in the Israel-Palestine conflict may tend to borrow the reports of major West-based international media that are widely argued to be favorable to Israeli viewpoints (Jackson, 2023; Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007; Peteet, 2016). At the same time, such societies are characterized by an overall weakness of extra-institutional political communication about the War that has functioned as major platforms for spreading pro-Palestine narratives in many countries (Siapera et al., 2015). We think that this mechanism might be particularly relevant for explaining the unexpectedly high search focus on Hamas across several socio-politically heterogeneous non-Muslim East Asian states, which are common in their very low level of interest. For example, in the most extreme case of South Korea, pro-Palestine activism (as well as pro-Israel activism) indeed remained a fringe phenomenon while local corporate media largely echoed the reports of Western media that were relatively receptive to pro-Israel narratives (Kim, 2023; Kim and Park, 2023).

## **6. Sociopolitical correlates of the skew in search interest**

What kind of country-level factors account for the partisan skew in search activity estimated in the previous section? We statistically analyze this question with special attention to three focal independent variables in addition to the overall level of interest in the War visualized in Figure 7.

*Pro-American sentiment:* Common intuition suggests that publics that have a favorable image of the US would also be more accepting of pro-Israel frames, but this relationship has not been tested with large-N cross-national data. We source this variable from global favorability polls about the US conducted in 2023 or 2022, operationalized as the percentage of favorable responses (Pew Research, 2022; 2023). This data is available for only 24 countries scattered across all continents.

*Support for Ukraine:* As of late 2023, the Russia-Ukraine War and the Israel-Hamas War were the two hot conflicts in the world with major implications for global geopolitics. Yet, it is still largely unknown how public opinion on these two Wars covary. This variable is operationalized as the percentage of people who support one's own country's continuation of support to Ukraine as of April/May 2023, sourced from a 2023 NATO member country survey (NATO, 2023).

*Defense ties with Israel:* Military-industrial ties are an important reason that many governments—especially in the developing world—maintain a positive relationship with Israel (Browne, 2017; Salman, 2021). We ask if defense ties may also influence public sentiment toward Israel in times of acute conflict such as the 2023 War with Hamas. This variable is measured as Israel's share of all defense imports for the period 2013-2022 computed using data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and transformed with a natural log to account for non-normality.

For control variables, we include the proportion of various religions (Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Orthodox), log Population, log GDP per capita, and the level of democracy. All predictor variables were scaled to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of 1 (See Online Supplement 6 for sources and details).

We first examined bivariable correlations between the outcome variable and all predictor variables. Among focal independent variables, support for Ukraine showed no evidence of association with the outcome variable, at least among NATO member states ( $r=0.056$ ,  $p=0.825$ ). Among control variables, Orthodox Christianity ( $r=-0.069$ ,  $p=0.600$ ) and log GDP per capita ( $r=-0.166$ ,  $p=0.200$ ) did not show a significant association. Table II regresses the outcome variable on all the remaining predictor variables (Online Supplement S6 contains the raw data used for the regression).

**Table II. OLS regression of the Google search volume for Palestine/Gaza relative to Hamas on various country-level predictors**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Interest in the War (Frequency of X Trends)	0.457*** (0.103)			
Interest in the War (Google search volume)		0.285** (0.097)		
Log Share of Defense Import			-0.061 (0.074)	
Favorable Opinion of the US				-0.192+ (0.101)
Proportion Muslim	0.493*** (0.110)	0.598*** (0.116)	0.794*** (0.100)	0.745*** (0.187)
Proportion Catholic	0.096 (0.078)	0.043 (0.083)	0.042 (0.089)	0.078 (0.117)
Proportion Protestant	0.006 (0.074)	-0.048 (0.080)	-0.049 (0.085)	0.035 (0.103)
Log Population	-0.070 (0.072)	-0.152* (0.072)	-0.217** (0.075)	-0.210 (0.126)
Level of Democracy	-0.072 (0.084)	-0.057 (0.091)	-0.041 (0.098)	0.638* (0.265)
Constant	0.000 (0.056)	0.000 (0.060)	0.000 (0.065)	-0.440* (0.170)
Observations	61	61	61	24
R <sup>2</sup>	0.829	0.800	0.770	0.641

*Note:*

+  $p < 0.1$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Overall, the proportion of Muslims was the single most powerful predictor of partisan search interest, with the effect size remaining relatively stable through variations in controls and sample.

Models 1-2 indicate that the bivariable associations shown in Figure 7 continue to hold even after controlling for various sociodemographic characteristics, suggesting that correlation may reflect direct causation as hypothesized at the end of Section 5 that is unreducible to confounders including the proportion of Muslims. Pragmatically, this result suggests that countries with particularly low levels of interest in the War—many of them in East Asia—may be effective locations for pro-Israel public diplomacy due to their estimated propensity to pro-Israel discursive framing.

Model 3 fails to support the reasoning that ties to Israel through defense spending would induce a pro-Israel skew in public interest in the War. Model 4 moderately supports the intuition that countries with publics that are more pro-American also tend to be more influenced by pro-Israel framing of the War ( $p = 0.074$ ).

## **7. Conclusion**

This paper traced the development of global political discourse on the 2023 Israel-Hamas War in its initial month through an analysis of X Trends and Google search volumes. Global hashtag activism on X was overwhelmingly more active on the pro-Palestine side except in the first few days of the war when pro-Israel hashtags temporarily took the lead. A qualitative analysis of the content of major hashtag groups led to the identification of two clusters of pro-Palestine positions that we labeled “humanitarian” and “radical.” Using our proposed “character-role summary” of partisan discourse about wars partly inspired by Mutua’s (2001) Savage-Victim-Savior(Hero) framework of roles, we noted the presence or absence of Palestinian heroism as a main difference between the two positions. Geographically, radical pro-Palestine discourse was dominant in Muslim-majority states in the Middle East with relatively muted influence in the rest of the world. Pro-Israel messages were strongly characterized by blame and anger towards Hamas with victimhood playing a comparatively minor role in political communication.

Our analysis of X trends, supplemented by a review of political statements and cross-national polls, revealed that the topics of “Palestine/Gaza” and “Hamas” robustly discriminate pro-Palestine and pro-Israel discursive frames in the 2023 Israel-Hamas War. Using data on geolocated Google search volumes, we estimated the global distribution of the skew in people’s topical interest in Palestine/Gaza relative to Hamas. This metric showed a strong positive correlation with the overall level of interest in the War, a pattern that remained significant even after accounting for various potential confounders including the proportion of Muslims. We proposed two alternative causal hypotheses for this relationship with opposite implications for the direction of causality, something that we believe may be a fruitful topic for future research.

## **List of online supplementary material**

- S1. Computation of Google interest
- S2. List of all unique terms and hashtags
- S3. Visualization of the spatiotemporal distribution of all 21 hashtag groups in Table I
- S4. Official statements about the 2023 Israel-Hamas War from three Arab countries
- S5. Calculation of correlations between poll results and Google-based metric of search skew
- S6. Raw data used for the regressions in Table II

### Online supplementary material (Link, anonymized for peer review)

<https://borealisdata.ca/privateurl.xhtml?token=b9baa66e-99bb-461b-b666-8c08a28e7deb>

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### **Competing interests**

The authors have no competing interests.

### **Data availability**

All raw and processed data used for this study are included in the online appendices. The only exception is the raw country-demihour X Trends data, which we are not able to publicly distribute due to the terms and conditions of the data provider. However, interested researchers can directly fetch it from X or *Twitter Trending Archive* or contact the authors individually.

### **Ethical approval**

Not applicable

### **Informed consent**

Not applicable