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The Blind Spot of Power: Why Israel's Realist Diplomacy Fails Without a Constructivist Lens

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Abstract

Objevtives:

This article examines why Israel's long-standing diplomatic narrative of self-preservation has become less persuasive in the context of the Gaza war and the renewed international momentum for Palestinian recognition. It asks how hard-power-centred diplomacy produces diminishing diplomatic returns when global audiences reinterpret security practices through human rights and self-determination norms..

Methods

The study employs a qualitative interpretive design based on documentary analysis of scholarly literature, International Court of Justice materials, United Nations documents, government statements on arms exports and Palestinian recognition, and public-diplomacy debates. The analysis combines realism, constructivism, norm-diffusion theory, and ontological security.

Results

The findings show that Israel's diplomatic productivity has declined not because its military, lobbying, and alliance resources have disappeared, but because these resources increasingly collide with humanitarian norms and transnational publics. Legal proceedings, arms-export restrictions, recognition of Palestine by several Western states, and domestic dissent reveal a widening gap between Israel's self-defense narrative and external perceptions of proportionality, civilian protection, and political justice.

Conclusions

The article argues that diplomatic productivity depends on the alignment between material power, narrative coherence, and normative credibility. In Gaza, Israel demonstrates the limits of realism when hard power is insufficiently embedded in legitimate humanitarian meaning.

Introduction

For more than seven decades, Israel's international position has been sustained by a diplomatic grammar that combines existential security, democratic self-representation, strategic alliance, technological modernity, and diaspora lobbying (Tahboub, 2023). Since 1948, Israel has often framed its foreign policy through the language of survival: the state is presented as a vulnerable political community surrounded by hostile actors, exposed to antisemitism, and therefore entitled to exceptional security guarantees. This self-preservation narrative has been institutionally productive. It has secured diplomatic protection in multilateral arenas, enabled extensive military cooperation with the United States, supported economic and technological partnerships with Western states, and nourished public

diplomacy that portrays Israel as a liberal-democratic outpost in an unstable regional environment (Gilboa, 2006; Harpaz & Shamis, 2010; Rossinow, 2018).

The Gaza war has made this long-standing diplomatic formula increasingly unstable. The 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks on Israeli civilians created a genuine security shock and reinforced Israel's invocation of self-defense. Yet the scale, duration, and humanitarian consequences of Israel's military response have generated a widening legitimacy crisis. Legal proceedings before the International Court of Justice, United Nations human rights scrutiny, debates on arms export restrictions, expanding global protests, and the recognition of Palestine by several European and Western states have collectively narrowed Israel's diplomatic room for maneuver (Reuters, 2024; UNRIC, 2024). The core puzzle is therefore not whether Israel still possesses material power. It clearly does. The more significant question is why the translation of material power into diplomatic legitimacy has become more difficult (Al Gharaybeh, 2025).

This article addresses that puzzle by developing the concept of diplomatic productivity. Diplomatic productivity refers to the capacity of a state to convert material resources, narratives, legal claims, alliance networks, and public diplomacy into audience acceptance, coalition durability, and policy space. A diplomacy is productive when its claims remain intelligible and legitimate to relevant audiences: domestic publics, allies, international organizations, legal institutions, media ecosystems, and transnational advocacy networks (Sarvestani et al., 2019). Conversely, diplomacy becomes less productive when these audiences reinterpret a state's preferred narrative as inconsistent, excessive, or normatively illegitimate (AlHawaneah, 2026; I. S. Lustick, 2020). This article argues that Israel is experiencing such a decline in diplomatic productivity because its hard-power strategy increasingly exceeds the legitimating capacity of its self-defense narrative.

The study makes three contributions to the literature on diplomacy, conflict, and international relations theory. First, it refines the analysis of Israeli diplomacy by moving beyond the familiar description of Israel's military strength, lobbying capacity, and public diplomacy. The article focuses instead on the diminishing returns of these instruments when they are confronted by human rights norms, self-determination claims, and real-time visual evidence of civilian suffering. Second, it integrates realism and constructivism without treating them as mutually exclusive. Realism helps explain Israel's reliance on military superiority, alliance maintenance, and coercive bargaining; constructivism explains why those resources lose diplomatic traction when audiences reinterpret them as violations of shared norms (Finnemore & Wendt, 2024). Third, the article proposes normative overstretch as an analytical category: a condition in which the use of hard power expands faster than the state's ability to narrate it as legitimate.

The central research question is: How and why has Israel's hard-power-centred diplomacy become less productive in the Gaza war? The article answers this question by tracing three interconnected dynamics. The first is the overextension of the self-defense narrative when the conduct of war is perceived as disproportionate and destructive to civilian life. The second is the emergence of a norm cascade in

which legal institutions, state recognition policies, arms-export debates, and public opinion increasingly converge around humanitarian and Palestinian self-determination claims. The third is the erosion of domestic and diaspora consensus, which weakens the internal coherence of Israel's diplomacy and reduces the persuasive power of hasbara as a public-diplomacy repertoire (Aouragh, 2016a; Jędrzejewska, 2020; Pánek Jurková, 2018).

Israel's diplomacy discussion has generally emphasized its unusual capacity to secure external support despite regional conflict and persistent international criticism. One strand examines Israel's strategic relationship with the United States and the role of lobbying networks in shaping foreign policy. Rossinow (2018) traces the early formation of the Israel lobby in the United States (Rossinow, 2018), while Mearsheimer and Walt (2007) argue that pro-Israel advocacy networks have influenced U.S. policy in ways that go beyond conventional alliance politics (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007). Lustick (2020) further highlights the capacity of the Israel lobby to affect the persistence of U.S.-led peace-process frameworks (I. Lustick, 2025). These studies are important because they show that Israeli diplomacy does not operate only through embassies and ministries; it also works through domestic political arenas in partner states.

A second strand focuses on public diplomacy and hasbara. Gilboa (2006) argues that public diplomacy has often been a missing or underdeveloped component of Israeli foreign policy, whereas later studies show how Israel increasingly professionalized its external communication through media, digital platforms, cultural diplomacy, and diaspora networks. Aouragh (2016) adds a critical digital dimension by showing that hasbara 2.0 may generate counterproductive effects when online publics reinterpret Israeli messaging as propaganda rather than persuasive communication. This literature is especially relevant for the Gaza war because digital visibility has made civilian suffering difficult to contain within an official security frame (Aouragh, 2016a; Jędrzejewska, 2020; Pánek Jurková, 2018)..

A third strand examines Israel's interaction with Europe and the broader normative order. Harpaz and Shamis (2010) show that the European Union's relationship with Israel is marked by a tension between normative claims and strategic cooperation (Harpaz & Shamis, 2010). Europe often presents itself as a normative power, yet its policy toward Israel has frequently been constrained by economic, historical, security, and diplomatic considerations. This tension has become more visible during the Gaza war, as some European states have moved from rhetorical criticism to more consequential measures, including recognition of Palestinian statehood or restrictions on arms-related exports (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024; Ezugwu, 2023; Zahavi & Ariely, 2023) .

Despite these contributions, three gaps remain. First, much of the literature still explains Israeli diplomatic resilience more than Israeli diplomatic decline. It describes how Israel secures support, neutralizes criticism, and maintains alliance structures, but less often theorizes the conditions under which these mechanisms lose productivity. Second, studies of lobbying and public diplomacy sometimes overstate instrumental capacity and understate audience agency. A message is not automatically persuasive because it is well-financed or strategically disseminated; it becomes

persuasive only if audiences accept the normative grammar through which it is encoded. Third, the relationship between hard power and legitimacy is often treated mechanically. Realist analyses explain why Israel uses force, but they do not fully explain why the same use of force may generate diplomatic backlash when framed by human rights, proportionality, and self-determination norms.

This article therefore reframes the literature around a more precise question: under what conditions does hard power stop producing diplomatic advantage? The answer advanced here is that hard power becomes diplomatically costly when it produces a visible discrepancy between claimed identity and observed practice. Israel's identity claims—as a democratic state, a victim of existential insecurity, and a responsible member of the international community—remain central to its diplomacy. Yet when military action is widely perceived as inflicting extensive civilian suffering, those identity claims are exposed to normative contestation. The result is not simply reputational damage. It is a deeper crisis of diplomatic meaning.

Realism begins from the premise that states operate in an anarchic international system where survival is never guaranteed. In this view, military capability, deterrence, alliance management, and strategic autonomy are rational instruments of statecraft (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007). Israel's security doctrine is intelligible within this tradition. Surrounded historically by adversarial environments and exposed to recurrent wars, Israel has prioritized military superiority, intelligence capacity, pre-emptive or retaliatory force, and durable patronage from the United States. From a realist perspective, Israel's Gaza strategy can be read as an effort to restore deterrence, degrade Hamas's operational capacity, and signal resolve to regional adversaries (Imran et al., 2025).

Realism, however, explains only part of the puzzle. It clarifies why Israel privileges coercive instruments, but it cannot by itself explain why coercion becomes diplomatically counterproductive. For this, constructivism is necessary. Constructivism treats power as socially mediated: material capabilities matter, but their meaning depends on norms, identities, and audience interpretation (Bozdaglioglu, 2007; Wendt, 2003). A military operation can be read as legitimate self-defense in one context and as disproportionate violence in another. The difference does not lie only in the quantity of force; it lies in the social process through which audiences define threat, victimhood, responsibility, and legitimacy.

Norm-diffusion theory further explains how such reinterpretation becomes politically consequential. Finnemore and Sikkink (2017) show that norms can move from emergence to cascade and internalization when norm entrepreneurs mobilize moral claims, institutional platforms, and social pressure (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2017). Risse et al. (1999) likewise demonstrate that human rights norms can affect state behavior through transnational advocacy, shaming, and the gradual transformation of domestic and international expectations (Landolt, 2004; Miklaszewska, 2019). In the Gaza case, human rights and self-determination norms operate not merely as moral rhetoric but as diplomatic resources. They enable legal claims, influence parliamentary debates, shape arms-export decisions, and provide a language through which states can justify recognition of Palestine.

Ontological security adds a further layer. States seek not only physical survival but also continuity of self-identity (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017; Subotic & Steele, 2018). Israel's diplomacy has long been organized around a coherent identity story: a state born from historical trauma, surrounded by threats, and entitled to extraordinary vigilance. That narrative provides ontological security because it stabilizes the state's understanding of itself and its role in the world. Yet ontological security can become rigid. When the state remains attached to a self-defense script even as external audiences increasingly read its practices through humanitarian norms, the state confronts identity dissonance. The diplomatic problem is not only what Israel does; it is that Israel's actions are increasingly interpreted as inconsistent with the identity it claims.

On this basis, the article defines diplomatic productivity as the capacity to transform material resources and narratives into legitimate outcomes. It has four dimensions. First, narrative coherence: the state's explanation of its conduct must be internally consistent and externally intelligible. Second, audience recognition: relevant audiences must accept, or at least not reject, the state's account of legitimacy. Third, coalition durability: allies and partners must be willing to bear the political costs of support. Fourth, norm compatibility: the state's conduct must remain sufficiently aligned with dominant international norms. Diplomatic productivity declines when one or more of these dimensions breaks down.

Normative overstretch occurs when the expansion of coercive practice exceeds the narrative and normative capacity available to justify it. It differs from military overstretch. A state may still possess substantial military capacity and yet suffer normative overstretch if the political meaning of that capacity turns negative. In Gaza, Israel has not lost the ability to use force, to lobby allies, or to communicate its security claims. What it has increasingly lost is the ability to make those instruments appear legitimate to broader audiences. This distinction is central to understanding why hard power can coexist with diplomatic vulnerability.

Method

This study uses a qualitative interpretive methodology. The objective is not to measure diplomatic decline statistically, but to explain how meanings of legitimacy, self-defense, humanitarian responsibility, and recognition are constructed and contested across multiple diplomatic arenas. The approach is appropriate because the research question concerns the transformation of political meaning rather than only the distribution of material capabilities. The analysis treats official documents, scholarly debates, legal proceedings, and public-diplomacy narratives as sites where international legitimacy is produced and contested.

The documentary corpus consists of five categories. The first category includes peer-reviewed literature and books on realism, constructivism, norm diffusion, ontological security, Israeli diplomacy, the Israel lobby, and public diplomacy. The second includes legal and institutional materials, particularly the International Court of Justice orders in South Africa, United Nations human rights materials, including

statements and reports that frame the Gaza war through humanitarian law and human rights concerns. The third consists of government decisions and official statements, including the United Kingdom's, Spain, South Africa, EU, Dutch, Canada.

The analysis followed three stages. First, the study reconstructed Israel's dominant diplomatic narrative by identifying recurring claims about self-preservation, counterterrorism, democratic identity, and alliance reliability. Second, it examined points of narrative contestation, especially where legal bodies, states, civil society actors, and transnational publics reinterpreted Israeli conduct through norms of proportionality, civilian protection, and Palestinian self-determination. Third, it compared the instrumental resources available to Israel with their diplomatic effects. This enabled the study to distinguish between material capacity and diplomatic productivity.

To enhance reliability, the study triangulates across academic literature, official documents, and state policy decisions. It avoids relying on single-source claims when discussing significant developments. It also distinguishes between allegations, legal proceedings, political recognitions, and final legal determinations. This caution is necessary because the Gaza war is a rapidly evolving and politically sensitive case in which empirical, legal, and normative claims are highly contested.

Findings and Discussion

Israel's Diplomatic Arsenal and the Logic of Self-Preservation

Israel's diplomacy has historically been productive because it combines multiple instruments into a coherent narrative system. Formal diplomacy secures recognition, alliance support, and protection in multilateral forums (Kumar et al., 2025). Military diplomacy demonstrates deterrence and operational capability (Barak et al., 2023). Public diplomacy presents Israel as democratic, innovative, and culturally connected to the West. Lobbying networks translate pro-Israel preferences into domestic political incentives in the United States (Waxman & Pressman, 2025) and, to a lesser extent, in several European contexts (Mualem, 2022). Digital diplomacy disseminates rapid narratives of threat, victimhood, and moral justification (Oreqat & ALBadri, 2023). These instruments are not separate; they reinforce one another.

The central narrative binding these instruments is self-preservation. Israel's diplomatic argument does not merely state that the state faces threats. It frames survival as a moral claim rooted in historical trauma and continuing insecurity. This narrative has been powerful because it converts military superiority into a defensive posture. It also creates a moral asymmetry: Israeli force is presented as necessary protection, whereas Palestinian armed resistance is framed primarily as terrorism. In many Western diplomatic settings, this narrative has historically generated high tolerance for Israeli coercion, particularly when violence could be linked to counterterrorism and regional security (Bar, 2020).

The Gaza war did not initially destroy this narrative. The 7 October attacks gave Israel a strong basis to invoke self-defense, and many allies immediately affirmed Israel's right to protect its citizens. Waxman and Pressman (2025) show how the Biden administration publicly articulated support for Israel's self-defense and its objective of eliminating Hamas while also pursuing hostage release and humanitarian objectives. Yet the subsequent course of the war strained this framework. The more the humanitarian consequences became visible, the more difficult it became for Israeli diplomacy to maintain the equivalence between military action and legitimate defense (Waxman & Pressman, 2025).

This is the first mechanism of declining diplomatic productivity: narrative exhaustion. A narrative becomes exhausted when repeated invocation fails to resolve the contradiction between claim and observed practice (Verdeja, 2025). Israel continued to speak in the language of self-defense, but expanding civilian harm, destruction of infrastructure, humanitarian crisis, and displacement created a competing visual and legal narrative. Digital media intensified this process. Images, testimonies, satellite evidence, humanitarian reports, and court proceedings supplied global audiences with alternative materials for interpretation (Thussu & Chatterjee, 2026). The result was not merely a public-relations challenge; it was a structural weakening of Israel's preferred diplomatic grammar.

The self-preservation narrative remains meaningful for many Israelis and allies. It cannot be dismissed as mere propaganda because Israeli insecurity is historically and politically real. The analytical point is different: even valid security claims can lose diplomatic productivity when they are pursued through practices that broader audiences reinterpret as norm violations. In this sense, the Gaza war shows that legitimacy is not automatically inherited from the existence of a threat. It must be continually reproduced through conduct that appears compatible with humanitarian and legal expectations (Boisen, 2025).

From Self-Defense to Normative Backlash

Israel's diplomacy has faced a growing normative backlash because the meaning of self-defense has been contested by norms of proportionality, civilian protection, and self-determination (Shaanan et al., 2026). Article 51 of the UN Charter provides states with a right of self-defense, but this right does not suspend international humanitarian law. Diplomatically, the key issue is not only the legal text but the social interpretation of military conduct. If a military campaign is perceived as collective punishment, indiscriminate destruction, or denial of civilian protection, the self-defense claim loses its persuasive power.

The ICJ proceedings in South Africa v. Israel are central to this transformation. The Court's provisional-measures orders did not constitute a final judgment on the merits. Nevertheless, the proceedings created a high-profile legal arena in which Israel's conduct in Gaza was interpreted through the Genocide Convention and the protection of Palestinian rights (Bob, 2026; ICJ, 2024). The diplomatic effect was significant. The case transformed criticism of Israeli conduct from dispersed moral outrage into institutionalized legal scrutiny. The subsequent declarations or intended interventions by multiple states

further demonstrated that Gaza had become a site of norm contestation beyond the immediate parties to the conflict (UNRIC, 2024).

This legal process matters constructivistically because courts do not merely settle disputes; they also authorize vocabularies of legitimacy. Once the Gaza war entered the ICJ framework, the international debate became less centered on Israel's security alone and more centered on duties to prevent harm, facilitate humanitarian access, and protect a national group. Even states that did not fully endorse South Africa's claims had to engage the legal vocabulary of humanitarian risk. This shifted the diplomatic burden. Israel could no longer rely solely on the claim that Hamas initiated the conflict; it also had to persuade audiences that its means of war remained normatively acceptable.

State policy changes reinforced this normative backlash. The United Kingdom suspended around 30 arms export licences for items assessed for use in military operations in Gaza because of concerns about possible serious violations of international humanitarian law (Government, 2024). The Hague Court of Appeal ordered the Dutch state to block exports of F-35 parts to Israel, citing risks related to international humanitarian law (Rechtspraak, 2024). Canada indicated that, since January 2024, it had not approved permits for items that could be used in the current conflict in Gaza and had suspended a number of previously issued permits (Canada, 2025). These measures did not eliminate Western military support for Israel, but they signaled a shift in the political meaning of that support.

The recognition of Palestinian statehood by several Western and European states further illustrates the same pattern. Spain, Ireland, and Norway formally recognized Palestine in May 2024, while later recognitions by other Western states reflected growing frustration with the collapse of a credible political horizon for Palestinian self-determination (Library, 2025; Reuters, 2024). Recognition is not a direct sanction against Israel, but it carries symbolic and diplomatic consequences. It indicates that Israel's capacity to indefinitely defer Palestinian sovereignty through security arguments has weakened. In constructivist terms, Palestinian statehood is becoming more salient as a normatively legitimate alternative to occupation, blockade, and permanent conflict management.

The backlash is therefore cumulative. Legal proceedings, arms-export restrictions, state recognition, public protest, and humanitarian discourse do not operate in isolation. Together they create a norm cascade that repositions Israel from a state seeking protection to a state required to justify its coercion before increasingly skeptical audiences. This does not mean that all states have abandoned Israel. It means that support for Israel is now more conditional, contested, and reputationally costly.

Public Diplomacy, Hasbara, and the Digital Failure of Narrative Control

Israel's public diplomacy has historically tried to project three images: democratic normalcy, technological modernity, and defensive necessity. In cultural, academic, sport, and digital arenas, Israel has sought to reduce isolation by presenting itself as part of the liberal international community.

Scholarship on Israeli public diplomacy shows both the sophistication of these efforts and their limits (Gilboa, 2006; Sarvestani et al., 2019). The Gaza war has intensified those limits because contemporary information environments are no longer easily controlled by state narratives (BRICUP, 2025; Sen, 2025).

Digital diplomacy has two contradictory effects. It enables states to communicate rapidly and directly to global audiences, but it also enables counter-publics to challenge official narratives in real time. Israeli institutions and supporters have used social media to highlight Hamas's attacks, hostage suffering, rocket fire, and the security rationale for military operations (Stern, 2025). At the same time, Palestinian journalists, humanitarian organizations, activists, and ordinary civilians have circulated images of destroyed neighborhoods, wounded children, overwhelmed hospitals, displacement, and hunger (Baroud, 2025). The result is not a simple competition between two public-relations campaigns. It is a struggle over moral visibility (Daniel Oloo, 2024; Ismail & Hafidz, 2024; Toth, 2025).

Aouragh's (2016) critique of hasbara 2.0 is especially relevant here. Public diplomacy can become counterproductive when it appears to deny or minimize visible suffering. The more a state insists on a security frame while audiences encounter images of civilian harm, the more the state's communication may be interpreted as evasive or dehumanizing (Aouragh, 2016b). This produces what can be called a credibility inversion: communication intended to defend legitimacy ends up confirming suspicion. In Gaza, the repeated assertion that military action is defensive has often collided with global exposure to humanitarian devastation. The consequence is not only criticism of specific tactics but distrust of the wider narrative architecture.

This digital failure also changes the relationship between elite diplomacy and popular pressure. In earlier periods, Israel could often rely on executive-level support in allied states even when segments of public opinion were critical. Digital mobilization has made that separation harder to sustain. Public outrage creates pressure on parliaments, universities, municipalities, courts, political parties, and civil society organizations. These pressures do not always determine foreign policy, but they raise the domestic costs of unconditional support for Israel. Diplomatic allies therefore face an increasing gap between strategic alignment and public legitimacy.

Public diplomacy depends on audience recognition. Israel's problem is that its audiences have multiplied and fragmented. The United States Congress, European governments, Global South states, international courts, universities, Jewish diaspora communities, Arab publics, and digital activists do not interpret the same message in the same way (Lebel & Amir, 2026). A narrative that remains persuasive in one setting may be rejected in another. This fragmentation reduces the efficiency of centralized hasbara. It also forces Israeli diplomacy to operate in an environment where counter-narratives cannot be fully marginalized (Aouragh, 2026).

Domestic Fragmentation and Ontological Insecurity

The fourth finding is that external legitimacy problems are increasingly connected to domestic and diaspora contestation. Israeli diplomacy has long benefited from the perception of domestic unity in moments of security crisis. Even when Israeli politics were internally polarized, security narratives often produced rally effects. The Gaza war has complicated this pattern. Public debates over hostages, the duration and objectives of the war, civilian casualties, relations with allies, and the future of Gaza have exposed tensions within Israeli society and among Jewish communities abroad (Givon-Benjio et al., 2026; Kertcher & Turin, 2025).

From the perspective of ontological security, this fragmentation matters because the state requires a coherent story about itself. Israel's self-understanding as a state that protects Jewish life, embodies democratic values, and acts defensively against existential threat is strained when parts of its own society question whether government policy serves those values. Domestic criticism does not automatically delegitimize a state; indeed, dissent can strengthen democratic credibility. However, when dissent challenges the moral foundation of the state's security narrative, it complicates external diplomacy. Foreign audiences may interpret domestic criticism as evidence that official claims are not socially uncontested (Eshel et al., 2026).

The diaspora dimension is equally important. Hasbara has often relied on transnational Jewish networks, pro-Israel organizations, and advocacy groups. Yet Jewish publics outside Israel are not homogeneous. Some remain strongly supportive of Israeli policy; others criticize the Gaza war in the language of Jewish ethics, human rights, or democratic accountability (Bar Peleg, 2026; Eshel et al., 2026; Plocker, 2025). This pluralization weakens any simple assumption that diaspora support can be mobilized as a unified diplomatic resource. It also changes the moral politics of criticism. When criticism comes from within Jewish communities, it is more difficult for Israeli diplomacy to dismiss it simply as antisemitism or external hostility.

Ontological insecurity emerges when the state's routine identity narrative no longer stabilizes its relations with significant others. Israel's significant others include the United States, European states, Arab normalization partners, Jewish diaspora communities, international legal institutions, and its own citizens. In Gaza, relations with these audiences have become more unstable. The Abraham Accords framework, which sought to normalize Israel's regional position by separating Arab-Israeli normalization from Palestinian political resolution, faces pressure from Arab and Islamic public opinion. Western alliances remain strong but more reputationally contested. Domestic unity is fragmented by disputes over war aims and political leadership. Together these dynamics weaken the routines through which Israel maintains diplomatic self-confidence (Sasley, 2026).

This does not mean Israel is diplomatically isolated in an absolute sense. It retains powerful allies, advanced military capabilities, and significant institutional support. The point is more specific: Israel's diplomatic system no longer converts these resources into legitimacy as efficiently as before. Diplomatic productivity has shifted from high-yield to diminishing returns. The same instruments that once

sustained legitimacy—military superiority, lobbying, public diplomacy, and Western alignment—now produce backlash when perceived as enabling humanitarian harm or political impunity.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Israel's diplomacy in the Gaza war is best understood as a crisis of diplomatic productivity. Israel has not lost its material capabilities, lobbying networks, military superiority, or central alliances. Its problem lies in the declining capacity to translate these assets into legitimacy. The self-preservation narrative that historically supported Israeli diplomacy has become less persuasive because many audiences now interpret the conduct of war through human rights, civilian protection, proportionality, and Palestinian self-determination norms. Hard power has therefore met a dense normative environment in which coercion must be justified not only strategically but also ethically and legally.

The findings show four interrelated dynamics. First, Israel's self-defense narrative has faced narrative exhaustion as humanitarian consequences became globally visible. Second, legal proceedings, arms-export restrictions, and recognition of Palestine have contributed to a normative backlash that reframes Gaza as a test of international humanitarian legitimacy. Third, public diplomacy and hasbara have struggled to control digital narratives because counter-publics can circulate evidence of suffering in real time. Fourth, domestic and diaspora fragmentation has weakened the ontological security of Israel's diplomatic identity. Together, these dynamics narrow Israel's diplomatic options even while its military capacity remains substantial.

The article contributes to international relations theory by showing why realism requires constructivist supplementation. Realism explains Israel's reliance on hard power, but constructivism explains the social conditions under which hard power loses diplomatic value. The concept of normative overstretch captures this condition: coercive practice expands beyond the state's capacity to narrate it as legitimate. Diplomatic productivity, therefore, depends on the alignment between material power, narrative coherence, audience recognition, coalition durability, and norm compatibility.

Future research can extend this analysis in three directions. First, comparative studies could examine whether similar dynamics appear in other conflicts where states invoke counterterrorism or national survival to justify prolonged military campaigns. Second, empirical research based on interviews with diplomats, policymakers, diaspora organizations, and civil society actors could deepen understanding of how legitimacy is negotiated behind formal statements. Third, digital-methods research could map how visual evidence, platform algorithms, and transnational advocacy networks accelerate or constrain norm cascades. Such research would refine our understanding of diplomacy in an era where military power, legal institutions, and global publics interact more rapidly than conventional foreign-policy models assume.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest:

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

This article is based on documentary analysis of publicly available academic, legal, governmental, and media sources and does not involve human participants or personal data.

Author Contribution

Author ContributionsSurwandono served as the principal contributor to the study. He initiated and developed the article's central argument concerning the declining diplomatic productivity of Israel's self-preservation narrative in the context of the Gaza war and the growing international recognition of Palestine. He was responsible for the conceptualization of the research problem, the formulation of the analytical framework, the design of the qualitative interpretive methodology, and the collection and organization of the documentary materials. These materials included scholarly literature, United Nations documents, International Court of Justice materials, government statements concerning arms exports and Palestinian recognition, and debates surrounding Israeli public diplomacy.Surwandono also led the substantive analysis of Israel's diplomatic narratives, examining how military capabilities, alliance structures, lobbying resources, and public-diplomacy strategies increasingly encounter resistance from humanitarian norms, transnational publics, and demands for Palestinian self-determination. He developed the article's principal proposition that diplomatic productivity depends not merely on the possession of material power but on the alignment of strategic capacity, narrative coherence, and normative credibility. He further prepared the original manuscript and integrated the empirical findings into the article's broader argument concerning the limitations of realist diplomacy.Takdir Ali Mukti contributed primarily to the theoretical development of the manuscript. He deepened the application of constructivist theory, norm-diffusion scholarship, ontological security, and contemporary diplomatic studies to explain how international audiences reinterpret state security narratives. His contribution strengthened the analysis of the relationship between identity, legitimacy, diplomatic representation, and changing international norms. He also clarified how the widening gap between Israel's self-understanding as a state acting in self-defence and external perceptions of civilian protection, proportionality, and political justice affects its international image and diplomatic credibility.Takdir Ali Mukti additionally contributed to the interpretation of public diplomacy as a process of meaning construction rather than merely an instrument of strategic communication. He reviewed the manuscript's theoretical consistency, refined its engagement with constructivist and diplomatic literature, and contributed to the critical revision of the manuscript.Both authors jointly discussed the comparative implications of realism and constructivism, interpreted the findings, revised the manuscript for intellectual coherence and publication quality, and approved the final version for submission.

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