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Sacred bounds on rational resolution of violent political conflict

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We report a series of experiments carried out with Palestinian and Israeli participants showing that violent opposition to compromise over issues considered sacred is (i) increased by offering material incentives to compromise but (ii) decreased when the adversary makes symbolic compromises over their own sacred values. These results demonstrate some of the unique properties of reasoning and decision-making over sacred values. We show that the use of material incentives to promote the peaceful resolution of political and cultural conflicts may backfire when adversaries treat contested issues as sacred values.

Current approaches to resolving resource conflicts (1) or countering political violence (2) assume that adversaries make instrumentally rational choices. However, adversaries in violent political conflicts often conceptualize the issues under dispute as sacred values (3–7), such as when groups of people transform land from a simple resource into a “holy site” to which they may have noninstrumental moral commitments. Nowhere is this issue more pressing than in the Israeli–Palestinian dispute, which people across the world consistently view as the greatest danger to world peace (8). We conducted experiments with representative samples of Palestinian members of Hamas, Palestinian refugees, and Jewish Israeli settlers to investigate whether decisions about sacred values are noninstrumental.

Instrumental decision-making involves cost–benefit calculations regarding goals and entails abandoning or adjusting goals if the costs outweigh the benefits. Although the field of judgment and decision-making has made enormous progress (9, 10), much more is known about economic decision-making than about behavior motivated by moral considerations. In particular, there is relatively little knowledge, study, or theoretical discussion of sacred values, which differ from instrumental values by incorporating moral (including religious) beliefs (3, 4) that may drive action (5) “independently of its prospect of success” (6). In laboratory experiments, conducted primarily among North American undergraduate students using nonrealistic hypothetical scenarios, people asked to trade off sacred values for instrumental rewards tend to react with outrage and anger, although they may be able to accept trading off one sacred value for another (11–13). The relative ease at which commitments to sacred values are modified in these experiments has led to claims that sacred values are merely “pseudosacred” and that if the costs of a sacred value become too extreme, or the benefit of compromising becomes too great, humans are adept at compromising ostensibly categorical moral commitments (13).

To determine whether reasoning about sacred values is noninstrumental, we conducted field experiments with Palestinians and Jewish Israelis. These experiments differed from previous research in that they focused on issues fundamental to a real political dispute, on issues that are centrally important to the lives of our participants who are key players in the dispute, and used tradeoff scenarios that were realistic. Thus, we were able to evaluate both (i) whether commitments to sacred values are vulnerable to instrumental calculations and (ii) the way reasoning about sacred values influences the ability to generate peaceful resolutions to violent political disputes such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Our experiments tested the general hypothesis that, when reasoning about sacred values, people would not apply instrumental (cost–benefit) calculations but would instead apply deontological (moral) rules or intuitions. We predicted that reasoning about sacred values would be noninstrumental in two respects. First, just as religion forbids any mingling of the sacred with the profane (14), we speculated that people follow a deontological rule or intuition that forbids any attempt to measure moral commitments to sacred values along an instrumental metric. We expected that people would react with outrage and support violent opposition to any attempt at compromise over sacred values for instrumental reasons. Moreover, we predicted that stronger incentives to compromise would backfire, because the more salient the attempt to measure sacred values along an instrumental scale, the greater the level of outrage would be. Thus, we hypothesized that adding instrumental benefits to compromise over important issues in a violent political conflict would ironically and irrationally increase outrage and opposition to compromise when those issues had been converted, in the minds of the antagonists, into sacred values.

Although people may resist any attempt to buy off their moral commitments to sacred values, this does not mean that sacred values are of infinite value. Apparently, people are able to measure the relative worth of sacred values they hold and trade off these values when they come into conflict (11–13). The second hypothesis we tested was that antagonism to compromise over sacred values would be mitigated by equitable losses over sacred values by both sides. People appear to have a desire for equitable outcomes that is pursued with a disregard to instrumental consequences (15). Thus, we predicted that those who hold sacred values would be less antagonistic to compromise over those values if the adversary suffers a similar loss over their own sacred values, even if the adversaries’ loss does not instrumentally alter the compromise deal at hand.

We tested these hypotheses in field experiments integrated within surveys of three populations living in the West Bank and Gaza who are key players in the Israeli–Palestinian dispute (16): 601 Jewish Israeli “settlers” (many settlers would be required to evacuate their homes and communities to create a viable Palestinian state); 535 Palestinian refugees (the claim of Palestinian...
refugees to a right of return represents a major obstacle to a two-state solution (17); and 719 Palestinian students, half of whom identified themselves with Hamas or its smaller Islamist ally Palestinian Islamic Jihad (the majority of Palestinian suicide bombers have been student members of Hamas). See supporting information (SI) for an expanded discussion of methods and analysis.

We measured emotional outrage and propensity for violence in response to peace deals involving compromises over issues integral to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (16, 18): exchanging land for peace (in experiments with settlers); sovereignty over Jerusalem (in experiments with Palestinian students); the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their former lands and homes inside Israel (in experiments with Palestinian refugees); and recognition of the validity of the adversary’s own sacred values (in each sample).

These deals (see Methods) were all hypothetical, but involved compromises that are broadly typical of the types of solutions that are frequently offered within political discourse in the region. In our experiments, all participants were opposed to compromise over these issues. In addition, a subset of participants indicated that they had transformed this preference into a sacred value, opposing any tradeoff over the relevant issue in exchange for peace no matter how great the benefit to their people.

Our aim was to compare reactions to different types of deals between these two subsets of participants: (i) moral-absolutists who had transformed the issues under dispute into sacred values; and (ii) non-absolutists who had strong preferences against compromise over these issues but did not regard them as sacred values. Among settlers, 46% of the sample believed that it was never permissible for the Jewish people to “give up” part of the “Land of Israel” no matter how great the benefit. This group contained moral-absolutists with respect to the Land of Israel and may be distinguished from the remainder of settlers who, although opposing ceding land, did not rule out treating land as a fungible resource under extreme circumstances. Among Palestinian students, 54% treated both the principle of the “right of return” and Jerusalem as sacred values. In the Palestinian refugee survey, >80% of participants were moral-absolutists with respect to the principle of the right of return for Palestinian refugees.

In each experiment, one-third of our participants were randomly selected to respond to a peace deal that involved a significant compromise over an important issue in exchange for peace (Taboo deal, see Methods). For example, Israeli settlers responded to deals that entailed Israeli withdrawal from 99% of the West Bank and Gaza in 80% of participants were moral-absolutists (Methods).

In contrast, non-absolutists for whom deals involved compromises over sacred values. In contrast, non-absolutists for whom deals involved compromises over strong preferences believed in an instrumentally rational manner; adding material incentives resulted in less opposition to compromise. All measures were mean centered, and error bars report standard errors. In experiments with Israeli settlers the same pattern emerged.

In our studies, participants were offered deals involving different levels of compensation for peace, and the results were analyzed to determine the impact of such compensation on individual and group responses. The analysis revealed that the level of compensation had a significant effect on participants’ responses, with higher compensation leading to more positive attitudes towards peace deals. Additionally, the study found that moral absolutists showed greater emotional outrage and support for violent opposition to peace deals, whereas non-absolutists were more amenable to compromise and showed lower support for violent opposition. These findings highlight the importance of considering individual differences in moral and political beliefs when designing peace negotiations.
concessions over sacred values; among Israeli settlers intense support for a violent response decreased by a multiplicative factor of 0.25 (Wald = 6.779, $P = 0.003$) in response to symbolic Palestinian concessions; whereas among Palestinian refugees, the predicted odds of responding with “joy” when hearing of a suicide attack decreased by a multiplicative factor of 0.519 (Wald = 6.893, $P = 0.009$) in response to symbolic Israeli concessions. The practical consequences of such changes in the popularity of peace deals and the leaders who promote them are significant. For example, a shift in popularity by a few percentage points of a political leader who advocates political compromise over violence can determine the results of an election.†‡ This has persistently been the case in the recent history of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (21).

Although previous research into judgement and decision-making has demonstrated the ways in which normative rules of rationality are systematically violated when people make decisions aimed at achieving instrumental outcomes such as maximizing profit (9, 10), our results show that people with sacred values may not reason instrumentally. These results have powerful implications for understanding the trajectory of many cultural, resource, and political conflicts, implying that when people transform a resource (such as land), an activity (such as hunting a particular animal or farming a certain crop) (1), or an idea (such as obtaining a nuclear weapon) into a sacred value, attempts to solve disputes in a bargaining setting by focusing on increasing the costs or benefits of different actions can backfire. Instead, when dealing with conflicts involving sacred values, culturally sensitive efforts at identifying symbolic tradeoffs that involve equitable gains or losses over those values may open up new channels for peaceful resolution of otherwise intractable conflicts.†‡

**Methods**

### Hypothetical Peace Deals.

**Palestinian student survey: Experiment 1.**

**Taboo.** Palestinians would recognize the sacred and historic right of the Jewish people to Israel. There would be two states: a Jewish state of Israel and a Palestinian state in 99% of the West Bank and Gaza.

**Taboo+.** On their part, Israel will pay Palestine 1 billion U.S. dollars a year for 10 years.

**Symbolic.** On their part, Israel will recognize the historic and legitimate right of the Palestinians to their own state and would apologize for all of the wrongs done to the Palestinian people.

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†‡For example, in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, Hamas gained a narrow victory (44%) over the secular-nationalist party Fatah (41%) in the popular vote, which translated into a clear majority (57%) of parliamentary seats. Our exit poll indicates that an upswing in support for Hamas from religious voters who strongly opposed the peace process and tended to be more supportive of violence was crucial to this result. See “PSR’s Exit Poll Results on the Election Day of the Second Palestinian Parliament”; available at http://www.pcrp.org/survey/polls/2006exitpoll/pal2006.html#religiou.

†‡To illustrate, Isaac Ben-Israel, a former Israeli Air Force Major General who currently heads his country’s space agency, stated in an interview on June 4, 2006: “Israel recognizes that the [Hamas-led] Palestinian government is still completely focused on what it considers to be its essential principles . . . For Hamas, a refusal to utter the simple words ‘We recognize Israel’s right to exist’ is clearly an essential part of their core values. Why else would they suffer the international boycott. . . and let their own government workers go without pay, their people go hungry, and their leaders risk assassination?’ Ghazi Hamad, a Hamas leader and spokesman for the Palestinian government, stated in an interview on June 20, 2006: “In principle we have no problem with a Palestinian state encompassing all of our lands within the 1967 borders, with perhaps minor modifications on a dunam for dunam basis [10 dunams = 1 hectare]. But let Israel apologize for our tragedy in 1948, and then we can talk about negotiating over our right of return to historic Palestine.” From the other side, Ben Israel, drove home the point saying, “when we feel Hamas has recognized our right to exist as a Jewish state, then we can deal.” In rational-choice models of decision-making, that something as intangible as an apology should stand in the way of peace does not readily compute.
Palestinian student survey: Experiment 2.
Taboo. There would be a two-state solution, resulting in a Jewish State of Israel and a Palestinian State in the West Bank and Gaza. Under this deal Palestinians would agree to give up their sovereignty over East Jerusalem.
Taboo+. On their part, Israel will pay each Palestinian family 1,000 U.S. dollars a year for 10 years in economic assistance.
Symbolic. On their part, Israel would formally declare that it gives up what it believes is its sacred right to the West Bank.
Settler survey: Experiment 1.
Taboo. Israel would give up 99% of Judea and Samaria. Israel would not absorb any refugees. This treaty would result in two states: a Jewish state of Israel and a Palestinian state.
Taboo+. In return, the United States would give Israel 1 billion dollars a year for 100 years.
Symbolic. On their part, Palestinians would give up any claims to their right of return, which is sacred to them.
Settler survey: Experiment 2.
Taboo. Israel would be required to recognize the historic legitimacy of the right of Palestinian refugees to return. However, Israel would not absorb any refugees. This treaty would result in two states: a Jewish state of Israel and a Palestinian state taking up 99% of the West Bank and Gaza.
Taboo+. In return, the people of the Jewish state of Israel would be able to live in peace and prosperity, free of the threat of war or terrorism.
Symbolic. On their part, Palestinians would be required to recognize the historic and legitimate right of the Jewish people to Eretz Israel.

Palestinian refugee survey: Experiment 1.
Taboo. Palestinians would be required to give up their right to return to their lands and homes in Israel. There would be two states: a Jewish state of Israel and a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza.
Taboo+. In return, the United States and the European Union would give Palestine 1 billion dollars a year for 100 years.
Symbolic. On their part, Israel would give up what they believe is their sacred right to the West Bank.
Palestinian refugee survey: Experiment 2.
Taboo. Palestinians would recognize the historic and legitimate right of the Jewish people to Israel. There would be two states: a Jewish state of Israel and a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. Palestinian refugees would be allowed to settle only in the state of Palestine, not inside Israel.
Taboo+. In return, the Palestinian people would be able to live in peace and prosperity, free of the fear of Israeli violence and aggression.
Symbolic. On their part, Israel would symbolically recognize the historic legitimacy of the right of return.

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