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By SHARON BEGLEY

The Key to Peace
In Mideast May Be
'Sacred Beliefs'

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If suicide bombings and intractable conflicts make you think the world has gone mad, Scott Atran can confirm your impression is correct: In many conflicts, reason and rationality have left the building.

For instance, rational cost-benefit analysis says the Palestinians "should" agree to forgo sovereignty over Jerusalem and the Jordan River in return for an autonomous state encompassing their other pre-1967 lands because they would gain more land and more sovereignty than they would renounce.

They should support such an agreement even more if the U.S. and Europe sweetened the deal by giving every Palestinian family substantial economic assistance for a decade. Instead, the financial sweetener makes Palestinians more opposed to the deal.

The reason is the existence of "sacred values," which make a hash of standard analyses, explains Prof. Atran, an expert on Islamic terrorism who teaches at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, at the National Center for Scientific Research in Paris and at John Jay School of Criminal Justice in New York.

From extensive interviews with Palestinian refugees, leaders of Hamas and radical Islamic groups in Indonesia, he has developed a new lens through which to view the proverbial clash of civilization, and sacred values lie at its core.

Although White House sessions with Middle East experts have been widely reported, less well known is that social scientists have a seat at the table, too. Prof. Atran, for instance, has briefed the Homeland Security and National Security councils on his research. Social science, he says, "has the attention of policy makers."

Sacred values are ideals so transcendent they have no equivalent in anything material. People in all societies have them. For Palestinians who say that sovereignty over Jerusalem is a sacred value, insinuating that it can be denominated in anything so crass as money is deeply offensive. It's so offensive, in fact, that more Palestinians say they would resort to violence to prevent giving up their claim on the holy city with the monetary sweetener than would do so without it.

Seeing actions through the lens of sacred values makes explicable what seemed irrational by the usual cost-benefit analysis. Many Israelis say rescuing soldiers snatched by

Hezbollah and Hamas is a sacred value, to be achieved at any cost. Hence Israel's willingness to exchange hundreds of Palestinian prisoners for a single captive, and to go to war over them.

And to outsiders, for Hamas to fire Qassan rockets from Gaza into Israel makes no sense, because they inflict little damage but bring horrific retaliatory destruction from Israel. To the Palestinians, however, the firings embody the sacred principle that "we are not impotent."

When sacred values are at stake, Prof. Atran says, "standard political and economic proposals for resolving long-standing conflicts, such as just material compensation for suffering, may not be optimal."

If material trade-offs can't buy peace, can anything? Lately Prof. Atran, who was among the first scientists to fathom that today's Islamic terrorists are drawn not from the ranks of the uneducated and hopeless but from the educated middle class, has been shuttling between Hamas and Israeli leaders. Among his conclusions is that "symbolic concessions might ultimately prove more important than material trade-offs in making peace," he writes in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists.

Releasing small numbers of prisoners would be one such symbolic concession. So would an apology, Hamas officials told Prof. Atran. Although Hamas wants its prisoners freed, a spokesman explained, "Israel must apologize for our tragedy in 1948 before we can talk about negotiating over our right of return to historic Palestine." In rational-choice models of decision making, that something as intangible as an apology should stand in the way of peace doesn't compute.

Prof. Atran told policy makers that the Palestinians will never give up their "right of return" to land they fled when the state of Israel was founded. Unless, that is, Israel gives up one of its own sacred values, such as its "sacred right" to all of Jerusalem.

Israel, in turn, would never apologize or give up Jerusalem unless the Palestinians let go of its sacred belief that Israel should not exist. Although sacred values can't be bought off with anything material, including land, they can be bartered for the enemy's sacred values. "Violent opposition to peace decreases if the adversary is seen to compromise its own moral position, even if the compromise has no material value," he says.

Israeli settlers perform a similar moral calculus. Adamantly opposed to giving up their sacred claim to greater Israel, fewer say they would use violence to defend that right if the Palestinians gave up their sacred right of return, Prof. Atran told the NSC: "Even a token sacrifice ... may weaken the other side's rigid adherence to its adversarial position."