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Scott Atran, Robert Axelrod, Richard Davis

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Sacred Barriers to Conflict Resolution

Scott Atran,1 Robert Axelrod,2 Richard Davis3

Efforts to resolve political conflicts or to counter political violence often assume that adversaries make rational choices (1). Ever since the end of the Second World War, “rational actor” models have dominated strategic thinking at all levels of government policy (2) and military planning (3). In the confrontations between nation states, and especially during the Cold War, these models were arguably useful in anticipating an array of challenges and in stabilizing world peace enough to prevent nuclear war. Now, however, we are witnessing “devoted actors” such as suicide terrorists (4), who are willing to make extreme sacrifices that are independent of, or all out of proportion to, likely prospects of success. Nowhere is this issue more pressing than in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute (5). The reality of extreme behaviors and intractability of political conflicts there and elsewhere—in the Balkans, Kashmir, and Sri Lanka, and beyond—warrant research into the nature and depth of commitment to sacred values.

Sacred Values
Sacred values differ from material or instrumental ones by incorporating moral beliefs that drive action in ways dissociated from material considerations. Devotion to core values (sacred or material) may be protected from trade-offs with economic goals. For example, in modern peace negotiations, the “right of return” for Palestinian refugees, and Hamas versus non-Hamas students. Our proposed compromises were exchanging land for peace, sovereignty over Jerusalem, the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their former lands and homes. This is one of the main obstacles to a lasting peace in the region.
tives to promote the peaceful resolution of political and cultural conflicts may backfire when adversaries treat contested issues as sacred values. Symbolic concessions of no apparent material benefit may be key in helping to solve seemingly intractable conflicts. These results correspond to the historical sense of experts. One senior member of the National Security Council responded recently (16), “This seems right. On the settlers who were to be removed from Gaza, Sharon realized too late that he shouldn’t have berated them about wasting Israel’s money and endangering soldiers’ lives. Sharon told me that he realized now that he should have made a symbolic concession and called them Zionist heroes making yet another sacrifice.”

As further illustration that sacred values can be at the heart of deep-seated political disputes, Isaac Ben-Israel, a former Israeli Air Force general who currently heads his country’s space agency, told us: “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 then-spokesman for the Palestinian government, told us: “In principle, we have no problem with a Palestinian state encompassing all of our lands within the 1967 borders. But let Israel apologize for our tragedy in 1948, and then we can talk about negotiating over our right of return to historic Palestine.”

In rational-choice models of decision-making, something as intangible as an apology may not be so much deal-makers in themselves as facilitators for political change. Leaders if all major Palestinian factions, including Hamas, were to recognize the right of the Jewish people to an independent state in the region?” with the answer: “Yes, but the Palestinians would have to show that they sincerely mean it, change their textbooks and anti-Semitic caricatures and then allow some border adjustments so that Ben Gurion [Airport] would be out of range of shoulder-fired missiles.”

For Israel’s former chief hostage negotiator, Ariel Merari, “Trusting the adversary’s intentions is critical to negotiations, which have no chance unless both sides believe the other’s willingness to recognize its existential concerns.” Indeed, recognition of some “existential values” may change other values into material concerns, e.g., “since the PLO’s [Palestine Liberation Organization’s] recognition of Israel, most Israelis no longer see rule over the West Bank as existential” (19).

We urgently need more scientific research to inform better policy choices. Our findings about sacred values suggest that there may be fewer differences than are publicly acknowledged in the material trade-offs that “moderate” and “radical” leaders in Palestine, Israel, and elsewhere may be willing to make. Overcoming moral barriers to symbolic concessions and their emotional underpinnings may pose more of a challenge but also offer greater opportunities for breakthroughs to peace than hitherto realized.

References and Notes
19. In May 2007, we broached ideas of mutual symbolic concession. Hamas would renounce Article 32 of its 1988 Covenant, which highlights “Zionist scheming … laid out in The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” a notorious anti-Semitic tract forged by Russian Czarist police. Israel would renounce the slogan, “A land without people for a people without land,” coined by Israel Zangwill a century ago to describe Zionist aspirations. Leaders on both sides acknowledged they would be renouncing a falsehood and grant that such statements by the other side could represent a psychological breakthrough. But discussion was halted because of civil strife in Gaza.