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### **► To cite this version:**

Morteza Dehghani, Rumen Iliev, Scott Atran, Jeremy Ginges, Douglas Medin. Emerging sacred values: The Iranian nuclear program.. Judgment and Decision Making, 2009, 4, pp.990-993. <ijn\_00505191>

**HAL Id: ijn\_00505191**

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Submitted on 22 Jul 2010

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# Emerging sacred values: Iran's nuclear program

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## Abstract

Sacred values are different from secular values in that they are often associated with violations of the cost-benefit logic of rational choice models. Previous work on sacred values has been largely limited to religious or territorial conflicts deeply embedded in historical contexts. In this work we find that the Iranian nuclear program, a relatively recent development, is treated as sacred by some Iranians, leading to a greater disapproval of deals which involve monetary incentives to end the program. Our results suggest that depending on the prevalence of such values, incentive-focused negotiations may backfire.

Keywords: protected values, sacred values, negotiation, Iran, nuclear ambitions, sanctions

## 1 Introduction

At least since the end of the Second World War economic and foreign policy decision-making has been dominated by the “rational actor” perspective which assumes that decision-makers model the world on the basis of rational choice (“cost-benefit”) calculations that are commensurable across cultures (Allison & Zelikow, 1999). Although it is well accepted that decision makers often fail to make normatively rational choices, the assumption that they nonetheless are seeking to maximize utility dominates. For example, the makeup and performance of the principal forums for U.S. policy (National Security Presidential Directive, 2001; National Economic Council, 2006) leaves little doubt that policy decisions should result from instrumental choices by goal-oriented political and economic actors. The official national security strategy of the United States explicitly states a commitment to “results-oriented planning” that focuses on “actions and results rather than ... rule-making” (National Security Strategy of the United States, 2006).

Recent work on “protected” (Baron & Spranca, 1997;

Ritov & Baron, 1999) or “sacred” (Tetlock, 2003) values has challenged the presumption that issues under dispute in inter-group conflicts are fungible and can be valued along a common scale. This new body of research has emphasized that protagonists in disputes often invest values with transcendental qualities (Durkheim, 1912/1995) which affect decision-making. For example in a large scale study of Israelis and Palestinians, Ginges, Atran, Medin & Shikaki (2007) presented subjects with peace deals involving mutual compromises over core issues, such as the future of Jerusalem, and experimentally varied incentives to compromise within each deal. In sharp contrast with the rational actor perspective, subjects who viewed the issues under dispute as sacred values responded with greater outrage to deals with added material incentives to compromise those values. Material incentives to compromise backfired presumably because they made salient the taboo against measuring commitment to sacred values along instrumental metrics. However, this paradoxical effect held only for people who treated the issue as a sacred value and not for those who saw the values as important but not sacred.

The existing empirical work on sacred values has been focused predominantly on conflicts embedded in a complex historical contexts often marking the life and identity of several generations (Atran, Axelrod & Davis, 2007), such as, dealing with issues such as sovereignty over Jerusalem, Gaza and the West Bank (Ginges et al., 2007; Rozin & Wolf, 2008), conflict over the Babri Mosque

\*MD, RI and SS contributed equally to this work and took leading roles. SA, JG and DM were primarily involved in the writing and analysis stages of this work. This work was supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF SES 0527396) and by Air Force Office of Scientific Research (AFOSR FA9550-05-1-0321 and AFOSR FA9550-09-C-0119). Address correspondence to: Morteza Dehghani, Northwestern University, 2145 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60208, USA. Email: [morteza@northwestern.edu](mailto:morteza@northwestern.edu).

in India (Sachdeva & Medin, 2009), and centuries old Sharia law in Indonesia (Ginges & Atran, 2009). Yet, it seems possible that issues with a much narrower historical context can become sacred values, especially when they involve identity-related issues such as sovereignty. In the research reported here, we investigate whether such values would also lead to judgments and decisions that would not be instrumentally rational. Specifically, we focus on Iran's stance on its national nuclear program, using it as a test bed for emerging sacred values.

In the past few years, the Iranian government has actively defended its right to having a nuclear program in part by framing the dispute as analogues to past historical events in which the advancement of the Iranian nation was interrupted by foreign powers. Specifically, the Iranian government has made "a conscious effort to link the proliferation issue to the struggle for nationalization of oil half a century ago, a struggle that continues to strongly resonate with the Iranian people" (J. Afary, personal communication, December 14, 2009). By drawing parallels between these events, the nuclear dispute is essentially framed as an ongoing resistance with deep historical context. Consequently, the Iranian government has vigorously defended its "inalienable rights" ("Iran Ready to Talk", 2009) for having the program: at recent news conference Iran's Foreign Minister Motakki argued, "we cannot have any compromise with respect to the Iranian nation's inalienable right" to acquire a nuclear capability (Jaseb & Dahl, 2009). While the public discourse in the West about the Iranian nuclear program is focused on risks, costs and benefits, the Iranian position that they "will not retreat one iota" ("Iran Vows", 2007) and "will 'never ever' compromise on nuclear dispute" ("Iran will 'never ever'", 2009) is mainly in the domain of sacred rhetoric (Marietta, 2009).

We investigated whether Iranians who treat the Iranian nuclear program as a sacred value would be amenable to material incentives to compromise. The U.S. and its allies, including the U.K. and France, are currently contemplating material "sanctions that bite" (Obama, 2009). It is critical, therefore, to know what the possible reactions of Iranians to sanctions may be. Our results have both theoretical and pragmatic implications, suggesting that depending on the prevalence of such sacred values, incentive-focused negotiations may backfire.

## 2 Method

Seventy-five Iranian subjects (mean age = 27.8; 34 females, 41 males; 96% having at least a bachelor's degree) participated in an online survey conducted in English. Subjects were recruited using snowball sampling which consisted of asking subjects to forward the link

to the survey to any number of people that they know. First, we assessed subjects' values regarding the Iranian nuclear program using Baron and Spranca's (1997) measure. The subjects were offered a choice between four options regarding the possibility of Iran giving up its nuclear program:

- a. I think this definitely needs to happen.
- b. I do not object this.
- c. This is acceptable only if the benefits of stopping the program are great enough.
- d. This is shouldn't be done no matter how great the benefits are.

The subjects who answered "d" were categorized as holding this issue as a sacred value. Next, in two between-subject conditions the subjects evaluated a hypothetical deal on the Iranian nuclear program. Half of them responded to the following "Taboo" deal:

Imagine the following hypothetical situation:  
Iran will give up its nuclear program, while US will drastically reduce its military aid to Israel.

The other half of our subjects responded to a "Taboo+" deal which was the Taboo deal plus an added material incentive:

Imagine the following hypothetical situation:  
Iran will give up its nuclear program, while US will drastically reduce its military aid to Israel.  
In addition the EU will pay \$40 billion to Iran.<sup>1</sup>

We measured support/opposition to the deal indirectly because of political sensitivities. Subjects were asked to predict the extent to which the Iranian people would approve of the deal, be angry about the deal, and believe that the deal was intended to mislead Iranians. This last item was added in order to control for the possibility that people who hold a sacred value might see the instrumental incentive as a signal for a bad compromise and feel suspicious about the deal. Each question was answered on a 6-point scale (1 = they will definitely disapprove it, 6 = they will definitely approve it; 1 = they will definitely get angry, 6 = they will definitely not get angry; 1 = the deal is definitely not misleading, 6 = the deal is definitely misleading).

<sup>1</sup>It is worthy to note that in politics often cash incentives are used both for reparation and compromise. Germany's offer of material aid to Israel, which Israel initially rejected although the country was in dire financial straits (Lustick, 2006) and Japan's offer to give monetary compensation to countries that it had subjected to sexual slavery (Onishi, 2007) are among examples where cash incentives were used for reparation. More recently, US offered \$25 million for information leading to capture of Osama bin Laden, which violated a sacred Pashtun value that tribesmen are generally willing to defend to the death (Atran, 2009). Moreover, the removal or lifting of economic sanctions could be seen as a form of cash incentive, although we did not present it that way.

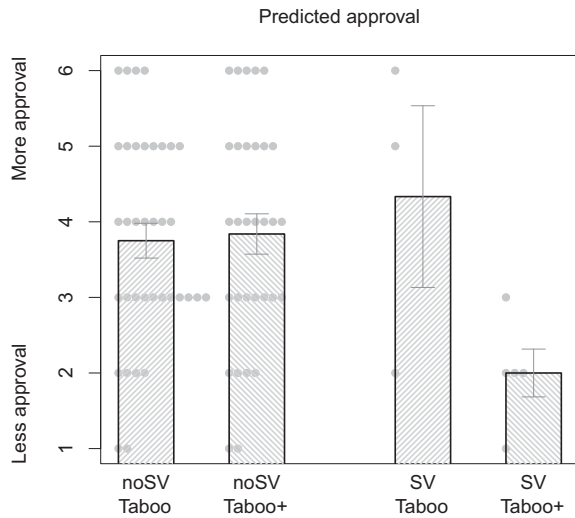


Figure 1: Predicted approval (means, with standard-error bars) as a function of additional Incentives (Taboo vs Taboo+) and Sacred Value (SV). Each small gray point is a subject.

### 3 Results

Eleven percent (8 subjects) perceived the Iranian nuclear program as a SV (choice d; 23% selected choice a, 15% choice b, 52% choice c). For predicted anger and predicted approval as separate dependent variables, we ran a 2x2 between-subject ANOVA, where the first factor was the type of deal (Taboo or Taboo+) and the second factor was whether the subject held a sacred value or not. There was a significant interaction for predicted approval (see Figure 1;  $F(1, 71) = 4.89, p = .0303$ ) and predicted anger (see Figure 2;  $F(1, 71) = 12.31, p = .0008$ ).

Subjects who held the nuclear program to be sacred predicted less support ( $t(6)=2.40, p = .0536, d = 1.96$ ) and more anger ( $t(6)=6.24, p = .0008, d = 4.65$ ) for the materially superior Taboo+ deal, compared to the Taboo deal. Subjects who did not hold Iranian nuclear power as a sacred value were uninfluenced by the added material incentive. Using the measure of suspiciousness toward the deal as a covariate in the analyses did not change the results; therefore the backfire effect of material incentives cannot be attributed to greater suspicions regarding the Taboo+ deal.

### 4 Discussion

Previous research into the backfire effect of offering material incentives to induce compromise over sacred values has concentrated on issues with predominantly religious connotations, such as sacred land. The present

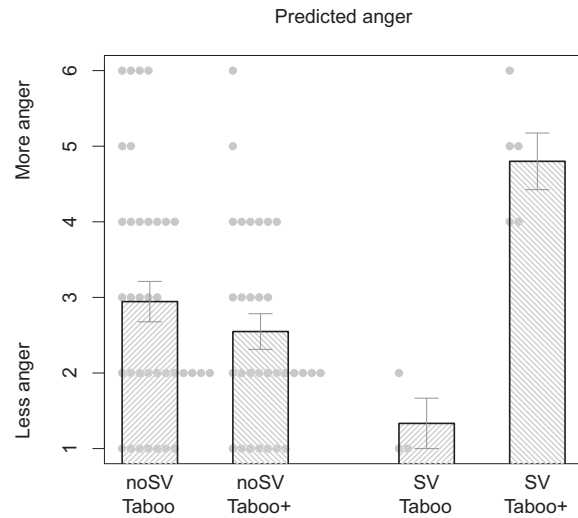


Figure 2: Predicted anger (means and standard errors, with the scale reversed so that high numbers represent greater anger) as a function of additional incentives (Taboo vs Taboo+) and Sacred Value (SV). Each small gray point is a subject.

results suggest that relatively short-lived political discussions can result in strong attitudes which have properties of sacred values. It is important to note that these effects were found in an online, English-speaking sample, a sample which is probably less exposed to the Iranian sacred rhetoric. Although the effect sizes were large, we would predict that Iranians living in Iran with limited access to Western media might show even stronger effects.<sup>2</sup>

It appears that achieving nuclear capability has the capacity for assuming sacredness for Iranians. Some have cautioned the U.S. administration that “You don’t bring down a quasi-holy symbol — nuclear power — by cutting off gasoline sales” (Cohen, 2009).<sup>3</sup> Our empirical results support this stance, suggesting that a policy wholly based on a “carrots and sticks” approach may actually backfire. In conflicts involving sacred values, symbolic

<sup>2</sup>We also note that the critical sample, those with sacred values, was quite small, 8 subjects. We still feel that these results should be taken seriously. First, the present results are a conceptual replication of the Ginges et al. (2007) study in a different context, thus plausible and not surprising in themselves. Second, small samples as such do not compromise the meaning of statistical significance. Significant results with small samples require large effect sizes. It is worth noting that, in general, the probability of replication of a result is dependent on p-levels but not affected by sample size (e.g., Killeen, 2005).

<sup>3</sup>Events at the time of writing are instructive. On November 27, 2009 The New York Times reported that the United States was working on a package of sanctions to impose on Iran if the Iranians did not halt the construction of an Iranian uranium enrichment facility at Qum (Cooper & Broad, 2009). Two days later, the BBC reported the Iranians countering with an “act of defiance” (“Iran planning 10 new uranium enrichment sites”, 2009).

compromises which may lack any material benefits, such as apologies for past disrespects, may be key to solving the issue (Atran, Axelrod & Davis, 2007). To the extent that these sentiments pervade thinking and policymaking in Iran, the debate may need to shift from sanctions and “business-like” negotiations to symbolic gestures (Atran & Ginges, 2009). Given the enormous political stakes involved in these types of issues, further research along these lines is urgently needed.

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