Sacred barriers to conflict resolution
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Attempts 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, 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 prospects for success. Across the world, people believe that devotion to core values (such as the welfare of their family and country or their commitment to religion, honor, and justice) is, or ought to be, absolute and inviolable. Such values outweigh other values, particularly economic ones (6).

To say that sacred values are protected from trade-offs with economic values does not mean that they are immune from all material considerations. Devotion to some core values, such as children’s well-being (7) or the good of the community (8), or even to a sense of fairness (9), may represent universal responses to long-term evolutionary strategies that go beyond short-term individual calculations of self-interest, yet advance individual interests in the aggregate and long run. Other such values are clearly specific to particular societies and historical contingencies, such as the sacred status of cows in Hindu culture or the sacred status of Jerusalem in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Sometimes, as with cows (10) or forests (11), the sacred may represent accumulated material wisdom of generations in resisting individual urges to gain an immediate advantage of meat or firewood for the long-term benefits of renewable sources of energy and sustenance. Political leaders often appeal to sacred values as a way of reducing “transaction costs” (12) in mobilizing their constituents to action and as a least-cost method of enforcing their policy goals (13).

Matters of principle or “sacred honor,” when enforced to a degree far out of proportion to any individual or immediate material payoff, are often seen as defining “who we are.” After the end of the Vietnam War, successive U.S. administrations resisted Hanoi’s efforts at reconciliation until Hanoi accounted for the fate of U.S. soldiers missing in action (14). Granted, the issue was initially entwined with rational considerations of balance of power in the policy-making level: The United States did not want to get too close to Hanoi and so annoy Beijing (a more powerful strategic ally against the Soviet Union). But popular support for the administration’s position, especially among veterans, was a heartfelt concern for “our boys,” regardless of numbers or economic consequences.

The “who we are” aspect is often hard for members of different cultures to understand; however, understanding and acknowledging others’ values may help to avoid or to resolve the hardest of conflicts. For example, at the peaceful implementation of the occupation of Japan in 1945, the American government realized that preserving, and even signaling respect for, the emperor might lessen the likelihood that Japanese would fight to the death to save him (15).

Symbolic Concessions

Our research team has measured emotional outrage and propensity for violence in response to peace deals involving compromises over issues integral to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with Israeli settlers, Palestinian refugees, and 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 inside Israel, and recognition of the validity of the adversary’s own sacred values (1). We found that the use of material incen-
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 apolitical concession and called them Zionist heroes making yet another sacrifice.”

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