Sacred barriers to conflict resolution
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To cite this version:

HAL Id: ijn_00505181
https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn_00505181
Submitted on 22 Jul 2010

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E
t
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 independ-
ent 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 discord elsewhere—in the Balkans,
Kashmir, Sri Lanka, and beyond—warrant
research into the nature and depth of commit-
tment to sacred values.

Sacred Values
Sacred values differ from material or instru-
mental ones by incorporating moral beliefs
that drive action in ways dissociated from
prospects for success. Across the world, peo-
ple believe that devotion to core values (such
as the welfare of their family and country or
their commitment to religion, honor, and jus-
tice) is, or ought to be, absolute and inviolable.
Such values outweigh other values, particu-
larly 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 mate-
rial 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 calcula-
tions 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 repre-
sent accumulated material wisdom of genera-
tions 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 propor-
tion to any individual or immediate material
payoff, are often seen as defining “who we
are.” After the end of the Vietnam War, succes-
sive 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 at 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 real-
ized that preserving, and even signaling
respect for, the emperor might lessen the like-
ilhood 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 com-
promises over issues integral to the Israeli-
Palestinian conflict with Israeli settlers,
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 inside Israel, and recognition of the
validity of the adversary’s own sacred values
(1). We found that the use of material incen-

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Resolution of quarrels arising from conflicting
sacred values, as in the Middle East, may
require concessions that acknowledge the
opposition’s core concerns.
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 apocalypse could not stand in the way of peace. Apologies may not be so much deal-makers in themselves as facilitators for political compromise that may also involve material transactions. At its founding in 1948, Israel was in dire economic straits (17). But Israel and the World Jewish Congress refused to demand compensation directly from Germany for the property of murdered European Jews. Israel insisted that before any money could be considered, Germany must publicly declare contrition for the murder and suffering of Jews at German hands.

An Iranian scholar and former top diplomat remarked recently that “symbolic statements are important if sincere, [and] without reservation. In 2000, [then-Secretary of State Madeleine] Albright seemed to apologize to Iran for past offenses but then said [in a memorandum] ‘despite the trend towards democracy, control over the military, judiciary, courts and police remain in unelected hands.’ Our leadership interpreted this as a call for a coup” (18).

Recent Discussions

We went to the Middle East in February 2007 to directly probe issues of material trade-offs and symbolic concessions with leaders of the major parties to the Israel-Palestine dispute. We asked 14 interviewees in Syria, Palestine, and Israel to verify statements for citation. No off-the-record statements contradicted these.

Responses were consistent with our previous findings (1), with one important difference. Previously, people with sacred values had responded “No” to the proposed trade-off; “No” accompanied by emotional outrage and increased support for violence to the trade-off coupled with a substantial and credible material incentive; and “Yes, perhaps” to trade-offs that also involve symbolic concessions (of no material benefit) from the other side. Leaders responded in the same way, except that the symbolic concession was not enough in itself, but only a necessary condition to opening serious negotiations involving material issues as well. For example, Musa Abu Marzouk (former chairman, and current deputy chairman, of Hamas) said “No” to a trade-off for peace without granting a right of return; a more emphatic “No, we do not sell ourselves for any amount,” when given a trade-off with a substantial material incentive (credible offering of substantial U.S. aid for the rebuilding of Palestinian infrastructure); but “Yes, an apology is important, but only as a beginning. It’s not enough, because our houses and land were taken away from us and something has to be done about that.”

Similarly, Binyamin Netanyah (former Israeli prime minister and current opposition leader in parliament) responded to our question, “Would you seriously consider accepting a two-state solution following the 1967 borders 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 characterizations 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.