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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, 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).

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 versus non-Hamas students. Our proposed compromises were exchanging land for peace, sovereignty over Jerusalem, the right of Palestinian refugees, and Hamas versus non-Hamas students. 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 problem with a Palestinian state encompassing all of our lands within the 1967 borders may pose more of a challenge but also offer greater opportunities for breakthroughs to peace than hitherto realized.

References and Notes
20. 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.