

Sacred Barriers to Conflict Resolution? A Critique of Atran's and Axelrod's Bargaining Model as Applied to the Israeli-Palestinian Confrontation

by Paul Kamolnick

Abstract

This article provides a critique of Atran's and Axelrod's conceptualization and application of bargaining theory to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Key notions such as 'the sacred,' and 'the symbolic' are either not defined at all or equivocally operationalized. The intrinsic relation between the symbolic and material levels of a phenomenon are misunderstood. Finally, the authors fail to modify their instrumental-rational bargaining paradigm to account for the uniquely existentialist challenges at the base of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation.

Introduction

Noted researchers Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod recently provided *Perspectives on Terrorism* readers and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) with a transcript of their extraordinary interview with Ramadan Shallah, Secretary-General, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).[1] Though not the interviewee sought, they state, regarding their data collection "the objective was to gain insight from field interviews into how to further advance scientific understanding of cultural and political conflict in order to create new theoretical and practical frameworks for negotiation and cooperation".[2]

Readers interested in their conceptualization of key variables and broader theoretical argument are referred to a previous publication in the prestigious journal *Science*. [2] An analysis of this theoretical statement from 2007 reveals, however, significant conceptual confusion. As presently formulated, it is the opinion of this writer that this research project will neither advance our scientific understanding of conflict resolution in general nor resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation in particular. In what follows, I identify conceptual difficulties with their current framework, and suggest in conclusion that productive insights derived from bargaining theory must fully account for the existentialist core of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation.

The Alleged Limits of the Rational Choice Paradigm

Traditional rational choice paradigms, the authors assert, have "dominated strategic thinking at all levels of government policy . . . and military planning," and have been "arguably useful in anticipating an array of challenges and in stabilizing world peace enough to prevent nuclear

war”. [3] This type of instrumental rationality was manifest in the nation-state rivalry between the United States and former U.S.S.R. during the Cold War. Yet the present Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and by extension others allegedly involving sacred values is as the authors state, at least partially governed by motivations immune to the types of material incentives and trade-offs typically demanded to resolve tractable conflicts.

[W]e are witnessing “devoted actors” such as suicide terrorists. . . . 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. . . . The reality of extreme behaviors and intractability of extreme conflicts there and discord elsewhere—in the Balkans, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, and beyond—warrant research into the nature and depth of commitment to sacred values.[4]

‘The Sacred’: Problems of Definition, Concept Formation and Operationalization

Despite its centrality, however, nowhere in this theoretical article do the authors actually define the concept of the ‘sacred’. One could have been easily derived from Emile Durkheim, the classical sociologist of religion, to whom they earlier make reference.[5] Instead, definition is offered indirectly in several contrasts drawn between ‘the sacred’ and its various others soon to be examined. Yet these indirect approaches do not remove but further aggravate conceptual confusion. Let us examine this more closely.

Defining the Sacred

Durkheim, in his classic *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, offers a definition and characterization of ‘the sacred’ as an essential component of uniquely religious phenomena. “The division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all this profane,” Durkheim states:

is the distinctive trait of religious thought; the beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends are either representations or systems of representations which express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers which are attributed to them, or their relations with each other and with profane things. But by sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred. A rite can have this character; in fact, the rite does not exist which does not have it to a certain degree. . . . The circle of sacred objects cannot be determined, then, once for all. Its extent varies infinitely, according to the different religions . . . Sacred things are those which the interdictions protect and isolate; profane things, those to which these interdictions are applied and which must remain at a distance from the first. Religious beliefs are the representations

which express the nature of sacred things and the relations which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things. Finally, rites are the rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of these sacred objects. [6]

Standard dictionary definitions [7], sociology of religion textbooks, [8] and scholarly handbooks [9] presume practically without exception that religion's *differentia specifica* is this essential bifurcation of the world into those radically distinct but essentially interdependent spheres one deemed sacred, and the other profane. The fuller implications of this for theoretically analyzing and formulating practical approaches to 'sacred barriers to conflict resolution' shall be developed later. For now let us explore the variety of indirect definitions offered and the extent to which they capture, depart from, or further confuse this standard definition of the sacred/profane distinction offered by classical and contemporary theorists in the sociology of religion.

The Nature of 'Sacred Values'

Devoid a definition of the sacred, the authors nevertheless offer several instructive if perplexing characterizations. Consider for example the following: "Sacred values differ from material or instrumental ones by incorporating moral beliefs that drive action in ways disassociated from prospects for success." [10]. But is it not the case that moral beliefs not specifically sacred or sacralized in the standard sense described above can also 'drive' (i.e. motivate) action? Is the sacred here a subset of morally-motivated action, or vice versa? Further, does "disassociated from prospects for success" or not require that one is a philosophical materialist? What the authors presume, it seems without warrant, is their own materialist, secularized conception of what actually counts as 'prospects for success'. In short, they presume as fact for any 'rational actor' that real success, genuine success, rational success, one that can actually count for a human being, must discount ends sought that by their own premises are impossible and not possible worlds for materialists to maintain.

It was another classical sociologist, Max Weber, however, who furnishes a conceptualization of values, their motivational basis, and their relation to social action that does *not* presume such a materialist bias, nor even a sacralized one, yet still captures the moral and ideal dimensions of value. Weber states, in a classical discussion of the four-fold bases of social action, that social action can be rooted in four distinct motivational bases. Instrumental-rational action privileges the value of efficiency of prospective means in relation to a materialistically-conceived end, i.e. it seeks and values most the least possible cost/expenditure for the greatest possible reward, and a clear relation between means and ends in a 'possible worlds' sense. This is the ultimate ideal-type underpinning of the 'rational choice' paradigm that the authors presume no longer captures the nature of 'sacred' conflict. It is basically what Atran, Axelrod, and Davis mean by "material or instrumental ones" and "prospects for success".

Yet as Weber asserts--despite the undoubted heuristic utility for causal explanation in the social sciences of a presumed instrumental-rational actor—that in fact social action has complex motivational foundations, i.e. instrumental-rational action does not exhaust the range of human valuing, willing and wanting. Indeed, three other types of social action each depart substantially from a narrowly-conceived, economistic cost/benefit maximization model. Affectively-motivated social action privileges payoffs in terms of the feeling states and emotions motivating certain choices; habitually-motivated action defies awareness and roots much social action in the unintended; a privileging of precedent, the routine, and the customary; and the ‘taken for granted’ backdrop of a world that mostly escapes human intention and knowledge. Finally, and most relevant to our discussion, is what Weber refers to as value-rational (*wertrational*) action, i.e. social action motivated by a belief in certain fundamental values, ideals, and imperatives conceived as non-negotiable categorically-binding ends - whether or not these are actually possible of realization in a purely biological-materialistic sense. Such ‘ideals’ encompass ‘perfected states,’ and ‘ultimate values’ as harmony, peace, love, justice, equality, liberty, but also the uniquely religious quest by Abrahamic-derived religionists for salvation and a sinless eternal life in Paradise.[11]

In fact, though confounding all kinds of key distinctions, the authors do arrive at something resembling Weber’s insight when they state: “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”. [12] The experienced gravity of, and devotion to, ‘core values’ though, is not a commitment to ‘sacred values’ and the authors’ conjoining of such fundamentally disparate ‘ends’ further obfuscates the precise limits they seek to discover that derive from specifically *sacred* limits to conflict resolution.

Compounding this confusion is a deeply confusing bundling of values that further undermines clarity regarding the precise meaning of the sacred. First, consider the relation between the sacred and the economic/material. Rather than understanding that virtually all magic and religion originate in the attempt to either coerce or propitiate those forces thought to control the conditions of worldly and other-worldly existence - yet another insight bequeathed by Weber in his sociology of religion [13] - the authors state:

To say that sacred values are protected from trade-offs with economic values does not mean they are immune from all material considerations. Devotion to some core values, such as children’s well-being . . . or the good of the community. . . or even to a sense of fairness. . . 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.” [14]

Again though, in the above account “sacred values” are conflated with, or at least not significantly differentiated from, “core values”. They are seen as broadly functionalist to the attainment, within an evolutionary-adaptationist logic, of “economic values”. Further, the distinction between “material considerations” and “economic values” is, by adaptationist logic, itself ambiguous since the ‘relative fitness’ of the organism—the core medium for evolutionary adaptation and competitive success—presumes reproductive and economic fitness maximization, each being a dimension of “the material” and ultimately also “economic” world. Granting to these authors the relative persuasiveness of recent evolutionary biological arguments warranting the extension of organism-centered classical Darwinian premises to those of inclusive fitness, kin altruism, reciprocal altruism, and long-run evolutionary stable strategies, they simply acknowledge an intrinsic connection between the material and immaterial, i.e. the securing of the material object (life and its extensions, economic and otherwise) sought through propitiation of the immaterial subject (spirit, and its historically variable concatenations). In short, they have ‘discovered’ a ‘sacred’ or ‘core’ connection to the ‘economic’ or the ‘material’ though in a bit more sophisticated Darwinian selectionist-adaptationist framework. That was not a connection lost to the progenitors of the classical sociology of religion, however.

Yet again, in a robust paragraph, there is a confusing jumble that further obfuscates, rather than clarifies, the exact dimensions of the sacred, and its potential constraint:

Other such values are 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. . . or forests. . . 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 resources of energy and sustenance. Political leaders often appeal to sacred values as a way of reducing “transaction costs” . . . in mobilizing their constituents to action and as a least-cost method of enforcing their policy goals. [14]

Let us grant again, for the sake of argument, these further extensions of the sacred to various natural resources on adaptationist grounds, we are still left in the above with two unwarranted extensions. First, the appeal by political leaders to ‘sacred values’ is likely a reference to what they mean by other ‘such values’, i.e. ‘core values,’ or more likely as we will soon see ‘symbolic values,’ but not necessarily ‘the sacred’ as classically understood. Second, the ‘sacred status of Jerusalem in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam’ is tellingly *not* included in the authors’ adaptationist narrative. In fact, it is simply dropped from discussion altogether since it seems, to this writer, to have identified a potential realm of the sacred that defies their generally indirect references. It is certainly one that is fundamental to the Israeli-Palestine confrontation.

The Nature of 'Symbolic Concessions'

A second major conceptual confusion concerns the manner in which these authors define, conceptualize, and characterize 'the symbolic'. First, like the concept 'the sacred', it is never actually defined. Had it been, several difficulties soon to be described could have been avoided. A symbol, as commonly defined, is an abstract signifier. A signifier, moreover, is a socially recognized, objectively binding referent to something beyond it, that to which it refers, i.e. 'the signified.' It is possible for a symbol to signify very different things to different people, particularly when the meaning of that symbol is mediated by fundamentally divergent interests, values, perceptions, aspirations, and, perhaps, survival imperatives. Examples of such multivalent symbols could be: the flag of the United States of America; the 'Stars and Bars' flag flown for various reasons of pride, honor, rebellious spirit, and sometimes race, by persons with various attachment to the Southern states and cause; the flag of Israel; the flag of Hamas, or of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; a Christian crucifix, Jewish Star of David, Muslim crescent and star; the flag of the Communist movement with hammer and sickle; or, the Nazi swastika. Symbolism and the symbolic also richly tap into realms of human existence, hope, despair; and mythic projection, and abstractions of all sorts. Combining the mythic-symbolic with its potentially mobile significations with those rare moments of charismatic fire that erupt in human history may account for some of the darkest and greatest chapters of the human spirit.

What is clear in all this, though, is that the symbolic is an abstract signifier connected in thought and often deed, with great potency for evoking the signified and mobilizing on its behalf. The question becomes then: Is this symbolic significance really so far detached from a materialistically-conceived, instrumentally-understood set of interests (signifieds), that it exists in the very sphere of rational conflict, and compromise? Or in contrast, must we simply describe rationality more broadly and expand its reach to grasp the depths of the symbolic though still remaining largely within a coherent materialist understanding of the basis of a given conflict and its potential resolution?

Atran, Axelrod, and Davis provide a really obscure venture into these issues: one that appears to this writer conceptually problematic. Their apparent thesis in this regard is the following: "Symbolic concessions of no apparent material benefit may be key in helping to solve seemingly intractable conflicts." [16] But what evidence do they provide that these "concessions" are of "no apparent material benefit"? Two examples are provided from the immediate post-war phase of conflict: one from the Vietnam War, and one from World War II. First consider the concessions sought by both sides after the end of the Vietnam War. They claim:

"Matters of principle or "sacred honor," when enforced to a degree 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. . . .

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 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." [17]

To begin, two different notions, "matters of principle" and "sacred honor" are used equivocally and again undercut the fundamentally unique nature of the realm of the sacred. Second, the authors concede that on narrow rational choice grounds U.S. interest in mainland China strategically trumped a policy of immediate or escalated reconciliation with Hanoi. Third, when a nation goes to war, it is both blood and treasure, people and the wealth of the nation, that are ventured. The fact that actual human beings were indeed mauled, butchered, killed, and a considerable number were missing in action, was existential and materialist to its core. Even in strictly Darwinian-adaptationist terms the authors could, if they wanted, account for the fact that one's progeny, and a nation's progeny, had been sacrificed in an inconclusive war that many likely felt had been lost on the streets of America and in its universities, not on the battlefields of Vietnam, or the heartlands of the Midwest and South. In what sense must one really dig here beyond elemental rage, and sadness, and loss, and betrayal, and existential-emotional values, to understand that personal attachments had been contemptuously disregarded and were actually unaccounted for? Consider, for example, how enormous the symbolic significance of Hanoi immediately empathizing with those lost, disfigured, or unaccounted for loved ones - what the authors refer to as the "who we are" aspect - would have been. This is something virtually unimaginable of course, since this same war caused catastrophic losses to their own countrymen and countryside. Their application of an economistic calculus to "individual and immediate material payoff" and calculations of an individual's share in national-level gross domestic product at the very least radically circumscribes what one should imagine by "individual or immediate material payoff" in relation to the potentially permanent loss of one's loved ones. But it also restricts or distorts interpretation of more abstract signifiers, including symbolic gestures and overtures of various sorts that reassure one - whether Washington, D.C. or Hanoi - that there is a clear understanding of the value of the losses suffered and the anxiety experienced by those whose loved ones remain unaccounted for at the war's close.

The second example is offered by the authors when they state that "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." [18] Again, this has nothing to do with sacralization but with symbolism, and a symbolism that again, while not tied to a strict monetary accounting, indicates, through a "signaling respect for," a recognition of a human signified (i.e. the legitimacy and right of a people to honor their traditionally recognized authorities). Further, it imputes value to one's opponent; recognizes their moral standing; and is related deeply to the

phenomena of human trust, social security, temporal continuity, and a potential power imagined by a people now defeated in war. These are existentialist-psychological values and need not share any space with a transcendently conceived sacred.

Applying the Conceptual Framework to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.

As might be anticipated, concrete application of this equivocal, ambiguous, and generally muddied conceptual universe does not significantly illuminate the material, sacred, nor symbolic dimensions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On two occasions these researchers conducted on-site field research with various categories of interested agents: in the first, an unstated number of Israeli settlers, Palestinian refugees, and Hamas versus non-Hamas students; in the second, 14 interviewees in Syria, Palestine, and Israel, considered “leaders of the major parties to the Israel-Palestine dispute”, were questioned. [19] The research team’s core objective involved measuring “emotional outrage and propensity for violence in response to peace deals involving compromises over issues integral to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict”. [20] Four core areas of fundamental conflict were then presented to the research subjects: “exchanging land for peace, sovereignty over Jerusalem, the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their former lands and homes inside Israel, and the recognition of the validity of the adversary’s own sacred values”. [21] In the first study among non-leaders, the authors report:

[P]eople with sacred values had responded “No” to the proposed tradeoff; “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. [22]

The results of the earlier study among non-leaders is then summarized:

We found the use of material incentives to promote 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.[23]

The results of the second study conducted among leaders were “consistent to previous findings,” the authors report, except that among leaders “the symbolic concession was not enough in itself, but only a necessary condition to opening serious negotiations involving material issues as well.” [24] It is not the bare report of findings here that illuminates the genuine conceptual difficulties of their perspective, however, but rather the flesh they put on its bones when quoting verbatim from various experts and leaders. At issue here, again, is what this writer detects as a

major failure to either capture the uniqueness of the sacred, or properly conceptualize the intrinsic relation between the symbolic and material levels of a phenomenon. Is it really the case then that “[s]ymbolic concessions of no apparent material benefit may be key in helping to solve seemingly intractable conflicts”?

First, the authors assert that this is indeed corroborated by “experts”. For example a senior member of the U.S. National Security Council stated:

This seems right. On the settlers [who were to be removed from Gaza] [sic], 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. [25]

As a “further illustration that sacred values be at the heart of deep-seated political disputes,” the authors report that Isaac Ben Israel, a former Israeli Air Force general who currently heads the nation's space agency stated:

Israel recognizes that the [Hamas-led] [sic] 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?[26]

Three key former or current leaders also furnish what the authors consider evidence for their thesis regarding the sacred barriers to conflict: Ghazi Hamad, a Hamas leader and then-spokesman for the Palestinian government; Musa Abu Marzouk, a former chairman and current deputy chairman, of Hamas and Binyamin Netanyahu who at the time was a former Israeli prime minister and later opposition leader in parliament. Each is quoted respectively.

[Ghazi Hamad] 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 our right of return to historic Palestine.

Tellingly, the authors immediately assert at this point in their text: “In rational choice models of decision-making, something as intangible as an apology could not stand in the way of peace.” [27] A point to which we shall later return.

[Musa Abu Marzouk]. The authors state that Marzouk:

[S]aid “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 a beginning. It’s not enough, because our houses and land were taken away from us and something has to be done about that.” [28]

And Binyamin Netanyahu, in response to the researcher’s 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 for the Jewish people to an independent state in the region?”:

[Binyamin Netanyahu] “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] [sic] would be out of range of shoulder-fired missiles.” [29]

Finally, consider three additional statements thought to further buttress their thesis. The authors state that despite Israel’s dire economic circumstances, the World Jewish Congress refused reparations from Germany for murdered European Jews. Israel insisted at that time (1948) that “Germany must publicly declare contrition for the murder and suffering of Jews at German hands”. [30]. An Iranian scholar’s remarks at a World Federation of Scientists convention are cited for having said that “symbolic statements are important if sincere, [and] without reservation.” [31] And Israel’s former chief of hostage negotiations is cited as saying: “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.” To which the authors state that “Indeed, recognition of some ‘existential values’ may change other values into material concerns, e.g.” and now returning to Merari cite him as saying: “[S]ince the PLO’s . . . recognition of Israel, most Israeli’s no longer see rule over the West Bank as existential”. [32]

Conclusion

The authors claim that the above evidence warrants their robust conclusion regarding the probable importance of the non-material, non-instrumental dimensions for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They state:

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. [33]

But do their findings support such a conclusion? Supposing one is even capable of conceptually relating such disparate and denotatively different terms—“sacred values,” “material trade-offs,” “moral barriers,” “symbolic concessions and their emotional underpinnings”—what is actually discovered in the various statements by protagonists, antagonists, experts, and ancillary authorities, about the supposed ‘sacred limits’ to resolving this conflict? The overwhelming common denominator among these statements, it seems to this writer at least, is that the nature of this conflict is not captured by typical rational choice bargaining scenarios because unlike most bargaining games, this one is about *whether one exists at all* as a distinct people with a land, and a history, a present and a future. Virtually without exception, the “symbolism” the authors discover is existentialist; rooted in materialist premises; and involves the process of moral recognition or non-recognition by opponents to the very right of another to exist as a people with a state.

Several questions seem relevant at this point. What is the “rational” choice or ‘instrumental-materialist’ negotiated/bargaining solution for an individual, people, or state, whose choice is *to be - or not to be? To exist - or not to exist?* Is it really a mystery why symbolism is so potent in existentialist, irredentist conflicts? Isn’t the difficulty of making a *symbolic* concession that it is also most definitely an *existential* concession, though not captured in a narrowly-conceived pay-off but a broader vision of a people’s rights, legitimacy, and possibilities? Is it not the case that before one can bargain, let alone imagine a matrix of economic trade-offs modeled by bargaining scenarios, one must first exist - secure, with rights, and authority? Standard bargaining scenarios when applied to the U.S. - Soviet Cold War rivalry presumed the rational desire of actors convinced of the primacy of a materialist this-worldly value schema—whether liberal democratic, or Marxist-Leninist--to exist, and to be rightfully regarded as seeking self-preservation within certain territorial spheres of influence. Bargaining theories in economics, psychology, sociology, and biology are remarkably successful not at predicting existential trade-offs, but once presuming existence is a value guaranteed to each, modeling strategies most likely to rationally maximize outcomes for each in an interdependent iterative game.

The intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not result from some irrational, non-instrumental symbolic attachment that subverts a more rational sense of one’s genuine best moves. It is instead composed of a type of brutal honesty that puts its cards on the table not out of spite, but as an alternative vision of the good. Consider for example the answer offered by PII General-Secretary Shallah to a core existential question put to him by his interviewers.

Question: Both Israelis and Americans, including their leaders, want to know if there is any possibility that you or Hamas could ever recognize Israel, not necessarily now but in the future, under whatever conditions? And if you could, what would you want for it?

Ramadan Shallah: I cannot speak for Hamas. But I will never, under any conditions, accept the existence of the state of Israel. I have no problem living with the Jewish people. We have lived together in peace for centuries. And if Netanyahu were to ask if we can live together in one state, I would say to him: “If we have exactly the same rights as Jews to come to all of Palestine. If Khaled Meshaal and Ramadan Shallah can come whenever they want, and visit Haifa, and buy a home in Herzliyah if they want, then we can have a new language, and dialogue is possible.” But until then, I would say to Netanyahu: “I will never accept the existence of Israel. I will never accept the existence of a state of Israel. Never. Ever.” (Smiling) I hope that is clear enough. After the Cold War, Americans began asking: “Is Israel a liability?” Under the Bush years, it was worse for us with America than even for Israel. Until the Americans see Israel as a liability, nothing is possible. We have had three Islamic-Israeli wars, including the one with Hizbollah, and we are headed to a religious war between Muslims and Jews—a clash of civilizations. [34]

Indeed, the ultimate nature of this confrontation has most likely been understood by its protagonists and interested observers for decades. In this writer’s opinion its roots lie in what is truly an existential conflict between two peoples that, while involving symbolic and sacralized dimensions, is ultimately mundane and this-worldly. It is rooted in a core disagreement over the relative value attributed to each other’s existence, at the expense of one’s own maximalist vision for one’s own people, power and prospects. Given this understanding, rooted in a deeply materialist-existential paradigm, concessions - symbolic or otherwise - that do not begin with this mundane first principle, are unlikely to shed light, or make progress. At root, the Israel-Palestinian confrontation is an irredentist-existentialist claim by two peoples for a specific land.

The relatively recent rise of fervent religious rejectionists on each side—radical Islamists and zealous Jewish supremacists—enormously complicate what decades ago was a fairly straightforward battle among secularists, including socialists of all stripes, for a territorial nation-state as final resting place for two displaced, diasporic peoples. The de-facto and finally official recognition of this two-state solution should it escape the bloody logic of religious maximalism, bodes well for some future settlement. Neither will receive all; both will receive some. Israel will exist. Palestine will exist.

It is not now the generation of 1968 though, that threatens a permanent future of heightened readiness for the next so-called suicide attack. It is the generation of 1979, of Islamist revolution, and the renewed power of a uniquely powerful tactical innovation with enormous strategic consequence, i.e. the targeted munition of choice or ‘martyrdom operation’. It is not desperation that led PIJ Chairman Shallah to sabotage and undermine any prospect of peace between Israelis and Palestinians. It was in fact the opposite, i.e. the prospect of a non-rejectionist vision of future relations, that led the PIJ and Hamas to have to proclaim their relevance in violent deeds to an ‘intifada’ that largely escaped their leadership. It was the PIJ especially—vanguardist, secretive, bloody, and effective—that engaged in the process of terrorist bargaining and escalation in order to prove its militant bona fides against the then-emergent HAMAS upstart. The two waves of terrorist bombings that first undermined the Oslo, and then Madrid peace negotiations, of course would be blamed on the obnoxious Israeli’s who later elected to construct a physical barrier; develop and deploy a more effective operational counterterrorist policy and also, quit Gaza.[35]

Should a profound Islamist immaterialism and desire to prove one’s ultimate worth to Allah in the process of killing and being killed permanently replace the earlier vision; should the jihadist covenant proclaimed in Qur’an 9:111 [36] replace a this-worldly calculus that so long provided a reasonable expectation of eventual, if hard-fought and difficult, irredentist bargaining, then the ‘sacred’ will surely have created limits to conflict resolution. To earn favor with one’s God through expiation of one’s sins, and the highest form of expiation—becoming blameless before Allah through killing and being killed [37]—as the militant desire to eliminate all who do not exclusively worship Allah - is that not a path to permanent bloodshed? If that is the path then yes, there is a sacred limit to conflict resolution. The instrumental and practical nature of it should not be misunderstood owing to a secularist bias on the part of academic researchers, however. The obliteration of the infidel usurper of a land once conquered by Islam, and therefore always a *waqf*, [38] is instrumental in the extreme. Absolutely instrumental. In fact, it is the height of selfishness that would guarantee not only the greatest of privileges of a sensuously blissful paradise for the martyr, but the intercessory rights of the martyr to provide for seventy loved ones. [39]

In the estimation of this writer, Atran and Axelrod have not yet proved that non-instrumental values - sacred, symbolic, emotional, core, or otherwise - do, would, or could transform the prospects for conflict resolution. What they have provided, however unintentionally, is a case for revising the application of bargaining models to existential conflicts of a national-irredentist type. What is at issue is the very conception of “the game” itself. The right to play a rule-bound game is the unquestioned first premise of game theory. It is that very premise, though, by not being granted -existentially, symbolically, materially--that is at the heart of the political violence and terror, and the apparent intractability, of this now century-long conflict.

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Notes

- [1] Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod, "Interview with Ramadan Shallah, Secretary General, Palestinian Islamic Jihad," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 4, No.2, May 2010, pp. 3-9.
- [2] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- [2] See *ibid.*, p. 3, note 1, referring to: Scott Atran, Robert Axelrod, and Richard Davis, "Sacred Barriers to Conflict Resolution." *Science*, Vol. 317, 24 August 2007, pp. 1039-1040.
- [3] *Ibid.*, p. 1039.
- [4] *Ibid.*
- [5] *Ibid.*, endnote 8, p. 1040.
- [6] Emile Durkheim. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Transl. J. Swain. Free Press: New York 1965 [1912], pp. 52, 56.
- [7] See e.g.: *Merriam-Websters Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th Ed., Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc., 2004, p. 1094.
- [8] See, e.g.: Kevin J. Christiano, W. H. Swatos, Jr., and P. Kivisto. *Sociology of Religion: Contemporary Developments*, 2nd ed. Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008, esp. chapter 1. R. L. Johnstone. *Religion in Society: A Sociology of Religion*, 8th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007, chapter 1; Lester R. Kurtz. *Gods in the Global Village: The World's Religions in Sociological Perspective*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2007, chapter 1; James C. Livingston. *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*, 2nd ed.. New York: Macmillan, 1993, esp. chapters 1 and 3.
- [9] See, e.g.: Richard K. Fenn. 'Editorial Commentary: Religion and the Secular; the Sacred and Profane: The Scope of the Argument', pp. 3-22 in R. K. Fenn, ed. 2003. *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- [10] Atran, Axelrod, and Davis, p. 1039.
- [11] See: Max Weber. *Economy and Society*, Eds. G. Roth and C. Wittich. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1968 [1922], vol. 1, pp. 24-26.
- [12] Atran, Axelrod, and Davis, p. 1039.
- [13] M. Weber. *The Sociology of Religion*. Transl. E. Fischoff. Boston: Beacon. 1963 [1922], pp. 1-2.
- [14] Atran, Axelrod, and Davis, p. 1039.
- [15] *Ibid.*
- [16] *Ibid.*, p. 1040.
- [17] *Ibid.*, p. 1039.
- [18] *Ibid.*
- [19] S. Atran, R. Axelrod, and R. Davis, p. 1039, p. 1040.
- [20] *Ibid.*, p. 1039.
- [21] *Ibid.*, p. 1040.
- [22] *Ibid.*
- [23] *Ibid.*
- [24] *Ibid.*
- [25] *Ibid.*
- [26] *Ibid.*
- [27] *Ibid.*
- [28] *Ibid.*
- [29] *Ibid.*
- [30] *Ibid.*
- [31] *Ibid.*
- [32] *Ibid.*
- [33] *Ibid.*
- [34] Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod, "Interview with Ramadan Shallah, Secretary General, Palestinian Islamic Jihad," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 4, No.2, May 2010, p. 8.
- [35] Meir Litvak, Ph.D., "The Radical Palestinian Islamic Movements and the P.A." Lecture, Tel Aviv University, 12 June 2008; Meir Litvak, "The Palestinian Islamic Jihad – Background Information". Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 26 February 2003. Available at: www.ict.org.il/apage/printv/5300.php. Accessed: 17 April 2008; See also HAMAS Covenant 1988, 18 August 1988, Available at: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp. Accessed: 14 January 2009.
- [36] Qur'an 9:111: "Allah hath purchased of the Believers their persons and their goods; For theirs (in return) is the Garden of Paradise: They fight in His Cause, and slay and are slain: A promise binding on Him in Truth, through the Law, the Gospel, and the Qur'an: And who is more faithful To his Covenant than Allah? Then rejoice in the bargain which ye have concluded: That is the achievement supreme." (Ali translation;

The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an. New Edition with Revised Translation and Commentary. Brentwood, MD: Amana Corporation, 1992, pp. 470-471.

[37] See e.g.: *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari*, (Transl. Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan), Arabic-English, vol. 4, Book 56 "The Book of Jihad," nos. 2782 – 3088 (July 1997, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Darussalam). A few hadiths are worth quoting in full: Sahih Al-Bukhari, **no. 2796**: "Narrated Anas: The Prophet said, 'A single endeavor (of fighting) in Allah's Cause in the afternoon or in the forenoon is better than all the world and whatever is in it. A place in Paradise as small as the bow or lash of one of you is better than all the world and whatever is in it. And if a woman (Hūr etc.) from Paradise appeared to the people of the earth, she would fill the space between heaven and the earth with light and pleasant scent; and her headcover is better than the world and whatever is in it'" ; **no. 2817**: "Narrated Anas bin Malik: The Prophet said, 'Nobody who enters Paradise likes to return to the world even if he got everything on earth, except a martyr who wishes to return to the world so that he may be martyred ten times because of the honour and dignity he receives (from Allah.)'" ; **no. 2818**: "Narrated 'Abdullah bin Abi A'fa: Allah's Messenger said, 'Know that Paradise is under the shades of swords (Jihad in Allah's Cause)'" . See also: *Sahih Muslim*. (Transl. Abdul Hamid Siddiqi), Vol.3, Book 10, "Kitab al-Jihad". Lahore, Pakistan: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf Publishers.

[38] See e.g. HAMAS Covenant 1988, 18 August 1988, Article Eleven: "The Islamic Resistance Movement [HAMAS] believes that the land of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf consecrated for future Moslem generations until Judgement Day. It, or any part of it, should not be squandered: it, or any part of it, should not be given up. Neither a single Arab country nor all Arab countries, neither any king or president, nor all the kings and presidents, neither any organization nor all of them, be they Palestinian or Arab, possess the right to do that. Palestine is an Islamic Waqf land consecrated for Moslem generations until Judgement Day. . . . This is the law governing the land of Palestine in the Islamic Sharia (law) and the same goes for any land the Moslems have conquered by force, because during the times of (Islamic) conquests, the Moslems consecrated these lands to Moslem generations till the Day of Judgment". Available at: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp. Accessed: 14 January 2009.

[39] See esp. David Cook. *Understanding Jihad*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005, pp. 22-31, for an excellent discussion of the instrumental nature of violent jihad and the various goods owed the martyr who kills and is killed on the field of jihad.