



Sustainable Security and Sacred Values

Hammad Sheikh

18 April 2016

There are a number of pressing global problems that we need to address in order to attain sustainable security, such as climate change, increasingly scarce resources, and the surge of violence by globally interconnected non-state actors. If not dealt with, these issues will lead to increased regional instability and perpetual political violence. Although these issues are recognized as pressing concerns, we have not been able to find effective solutions. Underlying this failure is the exclusion of the majority of the global community from policy-making processes. This marginalization can lead to ineffective policies as they fail to consider the interests and values of a large part of the world's population. Furthermore, given the results of social science research examining the role of values in decision making and in motivated action, policies that are ignorant of core values of the stakeholders will not only fail to garner popular support, they may, in fact, spark resistance and ignite violence.

Background

Most current approaches to negotiation and policy making assume that people make rational decisions – they weigh the benefits and costs of decisions and act in a way that maximizes their payoff. The values people try to maximize can be different for each party but they are assumed to be fungible: people may give up one value for achieving the other. Following these assumptions, policies and interventions often use incentives (e.g., tax breaks) or disincentives (e.g., sanctions) in order to influence the decision making of the stakeholders.

This business-like approach to policy making and interventions has led to the successful resolution of many problems, even very difficult ones. For instance,

Latest

An Update on the Security Policy Change Programme

Chances for Peace in the Third Decade

A Story of ORG: Oliver Ramsbotham

A Story of ORG: Gabrielle Rifkind

Most read

The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities

Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug

the Egypt-Israel peace treaty of 1979. In general, as long as the values of the stakeholders can be identified, incentives and disincentives can be designed effectively, leading to successful policies.

However, despite numerous attempts and the best efforts by the parties involved, this approach has been attempted in vain in an increasing number of contexts, and it has failed so frequently that some issues are now assumed to be intractable. A prime example is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where the majority of the people involved seem to have lost all hope: according to a [2015 poll by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung](#), 51% of Israelis and 38% of Palestinians believe that the conflicting parties will not even return to the negotiation table. In other contexts, like the Northern Ireland or Kosovo conflicts, solutions devised with current approaches may prove to be unsustainable as they have neglected to address underlying concerns.

Sacred Values

The lack of success of current approaches is due to the underlying assumption that all values are in principal fungible: that they are mutually interchangeable. Social science research over the last 20 years suggests that this is not the case. Instead, people consider some values as so important or absolute that they refuse to even measure them on the same metric as material values. Consider, for instance, how parents may react were one to offer them money for selling their child. Most parents will decline the offer no matter how much money is involved. They will regard even considering the value of their child in monetary terms as immoral. Moreover, they will likely feel insulted and disgusted by the offer. One would get thrown out of the house if not directly reported to the authorities. This result is due to the fact that the offer fails to consider the duty most parents feel towards their child; business-like

Cartels

ORG's Vision

Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres

negotiation will not only be futile but will most likely backfire leading to moral anger and a breakdown of relationships. Such core values that seem to be resistant to tradeoffs with material values (e.g., monetary gains or job security), have been termed “sacred values”.

As the name suggests, sacred values can be religious (e.g., holy land or sanctity of life) but they need not to be (e.g., equality or racial purity). However, religious ritual can transform material values into sacred ones. For example, when land is transformed from an agricultural and residential resource into “holy land.” This seems to be particularly the case in existential conflict between groups when people feel that their very existence is threatened, as is the case in the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Studies conducted before the Iran nuclear deal also found that under high pressure from other countries, a politically meaningful minority of Iranians (14%) have come to consider the nuclear program as a sacred right suggesting that material values can become sacralized in a relatively short time. The process of sacralization, however, is not well understood yet.

When it comes to reasoning over sacred values, neuroscience studies show that decisions relating to sacred values are processed differently in the brain from material cost-benefit calculations. When people reason over sacred values as compared to material values, they are more concerned with the rectitude of their actions than with prospects. In other words, they are more concerned with morality and duties than with expected outcomes. If policy proposals that affect sacred values fail to consider this different mode of reasoning, the expected outcome is not only failure to achieve the intended aims but also resistance by the affected people, which can result in violence.

Seemingly Intractable Issues

Research shows that the core issues in a number of seemingly intractable conflicts are indeed considered sacred values by sizable parts of the populations involved, who show counterintuitive reactions to proposed solutions leading to a failure to resolve the issue. For instance, one research study on the support of peace deals in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict presented a peace proposal that required giving up core demands (e.g., the right of return for Palestinians). It found that “sweetening” deals with material incentives can actually backfire and exacerbate the situation. When presented with the peace deals, only a minority of Palestinians showed increased support when deals were sweetened with material incentives such as compensation payments in the form of development aid for a Palestinian state resulting from the agreement. However, the vast majority of Palestinians (more than 4 in 5) considered their core demands as sacred values and reacted with moral outrage when the deal included material compensation. They also predicted increased violent resistance if such a deal was to be agreed to by their leaders. This “backfire effect” of material incentives has since been demonstrated by Israeli Settlers when asked about giving up settling in Gaza and the West Bank (land they believe was promised to them by God) and in other seemingly intractable conflicts such as the Iranian nuclear ambitions (right to development of nuclear energy), the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India (Kashmir), and militant Jihad in Indonesia (Sharia law).

In addition, across a number of different contexts, sacred values have been shown to incite strong emotions and spur extreme actions in their defense. People are willing to fight for their sacred values well beyond the prospect of success, seemingly disregarding self-interest. The concern for sacred values seems also to be a driving factor for the droves of young people who have been joining Islamists in Syria and Iraq, exchanging the relative comfort of their home

countries for a war zone risking life and limb. For instance, a study among potential Jihadis in Morocco – one of the countries with the highest levels of foreign fighters leaving for Syria and Iraq – showed that people who considered Sharia law as sacred, expressed heightened support for militant Jihad and willingness to fight and die for the implementation of Sharia in Morocco.

Achieving Sustainable Security

The reality that sacred values are not fungible with material values and that otherwise reasonable policies and interventions can badly backfire does not mean we need to completely refrain from dealing with sacred values altogether. Conflicts over sacred values are not unsolvable. In fact, the very study that first demonstrated the backfire effect of business-like approaches in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also found a reason for hope: people who considered the core demands in the conflict as sacred *did* show willingness to compromise if the other side made some painful concession relating to their deeply held sacred values. In particular, Israelis and Palestinians showed more flexibility regarding their sacred values when the deal included mutual recognition; that is, Palestinians would recognize Israel as a Jewish state and Israelis would recognize the role of Israel in the *Nakba* (Arabic for “catastrophe,” a term that relates to the expulsion and flight of Palestinians from what now is Israel). However, identifying these kinds of resolutions requires knowledge of the sacred values of all involved parties and thoughtful consideration of them in devising solutions. Unfortunately, our knowledge of sacred values held by communities worldwide is scarce.

Just like the global clusters of values shown by the recurring [World Value Survey](#), we can expect sacred values to differ considerably across communities and cultures and to change over time. At the minimum, we need to

systematically assess sacred values across the world (similar to the World Value Survey), so decision-makers can have access to this knowledge. But for security to be sustainable in the long run, we will also need to bring communities with different sacred values to the table when we seek solutions to the most pressing issues we face today. The world cannot afford a policy-making process with global impact that is dominated by a small exclusive group of countries (e.g., the permanent member states of the UN security council) without regard for the multitude of cultures and values in the world. Because of this ignorance about the core concerns of large parts of the global community, our policies and interventions may not only fail to successfully address the issues at hand, but may actually badly backfire – by accidentally violating sacred values of the people they impact – and lead to more unrest and instability.

Image credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Hammad Sheikh is an ARTIS research fellow at the New School for Social Research and a visiting scholar at the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflicts (Harris Manchester College, Oxford University). He received a Psychologie Diplom from the Free University of Berlin and a PhD in social psychology from the New School for Social Research. Prior to his studies at the New School, he conducted research at the Max-Planck-Institute for Human Development in Berlin, the University College Dublin, and the Free University of Berlin. His research focuses on the psychology of intergroup conflict, and uniquely brings together field research (e.g., interviews with combatants in war zones) with traditional psychological methods like questionnaires and cognitive experiments. He is currently examining how commitments to groups and values can lead people to

become willing to make extremely costly sacrifices for a cause, including fighting and dying for it.

Share this page



Contact

Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
Charity no. 299436
Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745

Follow us



Useful links

[Login](#)
[Contact us](#)
[Sitemap](#)
[Accessibility](#)
[Terms & Conditions](#)
[Privacy policy](#)