

Sacred Values and Political Life

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Abstract

Humans tend to organize themselves in large, complex polities united by what are often called “sacred values” such as god or nation. What values become sacred for a group is somewhat arbitrary - a function of cultural context and need. Regardless of the specific issue (whether it concerns the right to make salt, an old growth rain forest, a “holy” city, or national boundaries), all sacred values appear to be defined by a taboo against material trade-offs. This chapter will present recent experiments and surveys carried out in Israel, Palestine, Iran, Indonesia and the United States that is beginning to clarify the social and psychological mechanisms underlying the sacralization of preferences, and reveal several implications of sacred values for political life and intergroup conflict. Broadly, this research demonstrates that sacred values constrain choices, thus strengthening a group’s social contract; they are associated with highly consistent choices across contexts, and lead to behaviors that are dramatically insensitive to material consequences.

1. Introduction

Across the world, most humans group themselves in large complex groups of non-kin. These groups, now typically nationalities or religions, are abstract entities. Our primary family groups have a concrete meaning. When we think of them, we can easily picture the people - siblings, parents, uncles and nieces - that make up our family. But our national and our religious groups are abstract in nature, so abstract they are often termed "imagined communities" (Anderson, 2006). While it makes evolutionary sense to subordinate self interest to the interest of our close kin, it is less clear why and how we subordinate self interest in the name of our imagined communities. Yet much political life involves us sacrificing self and familial interests to large, abstract reference groups.

How and why do we set aside our genetic interests and cooperate within such large groups? If we think about how we behave in the economic marketplace, and assume, as much social science has done, that humans are fundamentally creatures of the marketplace, it is difficult to understand subordination of self interest to large groups of non kin. Much of our life occurs in the economic marketplace. We buy and sell food, houses, cars, and our time. These things can be given a monetary value which makes them exchangeable. Most of the time this is a productive and efficient way of organizing our lives. But if everything, including our commitments to each other, were subject to cost-benefit analysis, and if everything was constantly having its utility evaluated, social contracts would be frail. While there are elegant theories (Fiske, 1992) regarding the way we reason differently in different domains of human life, and empirical demonstrations of that fact (Gneezy & Rustichini, 2000; Heyman & Ariely, 2004), the economic marketplace is such a powerful arrangement, and so dominant in our lives, that it can be difficult to comprehend why others refuse to place a monetary value on some things. Yet a look within ourselves reveals things we would refuse to exchange for money. Sometimes these will be things have a symbolic meaning in our lives (such as a

grandfathers watch), sometimes these will be things that represent moral values (a prohibition against selling body organs).

A recent body of work has begun to investigate how we reason about such values, and the way they influence political life. The central thesis is that we often sacrifice our self interest in the name of what many have termed “sacred values”, values like “god”, “flag”, or “national rights” that people treat differently from fungible economic interests or preferences (Scott Atran & Ginges, 2012; J. Ginges, Atran, Sachdeva, & Medin, 2011). Sacred values are not necessarily values with any obvious religious content. Sacred values can have an intrinsic moral value from the perspective of those who hold them, yet at other times they may be mundane. What gives sacred values their meaning, and their moral status, is their separation from the profane domain of everyday life (Durkheim, 1955; Tetlock, 2003). Thus, their defining characteristic is a taboo against considering sacred values as fungible with economic things or valuing sacred values along a material or monetary scale (J. Ginges, Atran, Medin, & Shikaki, 2007). In this chapter I will review some recent empirical investigations into sacred values, and argue that sacred values are associated with non instrumentally-rational commitments to a set of beliefs, practices or places that might serve to both unify people within groups, and create conflicts between groups.

II. Sacred values and the material world: the backfire effect

“The sacred and profane are always and everywhere conceived by the human intellect as separate genera, as two worlds with nothing in common.... They are different in kind ... The

mind experiences a deep repugnance about mingling”

-Emile Durkheim, *The elementary forms of religious life*

Beginning in the late 1990's, two streams of research began to investigate what sacred values. First, Baron & Spranca (1997) demonstrated that people will sometimes decide that things should be taboo, no matter how great the benefits. For example, some participants refused to sanction genetic engineering of intelligence, regardless of the costs or benefits. The authors argued that these types of protected values, to which people had what they termed absolute commitments were widespread and needed to be better understood because they blocked reasonable utilitarian attempts to value all things along a common scale - attempts they regarded as important for a society seeking to maximize the value satisfaction of all. (Baron & Spranca, 1997). A few years after Baron and colleagues published work on protected values (Baron & Leshner, 2000; Baron & Spranca, 1997; Ritov & Baron, 1999), Tetlock and colleagues published work on what they termed “sacred values” which were defined as values that people treated as having infinite or transcendent value that precluded any trade-offs (McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000; Tetlock, 2003). They found that certain trade-offs were viewed as so outrageous that their mere contemplation would be condemned. For example, in one vignette study with college undergraduates the more time a hospital administrator took to decide to save the life of a child instead of saving money, the more outraged people became.

While both lines of research demonstrated that people would often claim protected or sacred values, there was some doubt about the veracity of such claims (Baron & Leshner, 2000; Tetlock, 2003). In particular, Tetlock (2003) argued that sacred values are “pseudo sacred”, arguing that in a real world of scarce resources we eventually will put a price on everything. Tetlock (2003) portrays people as taking a delicate tightrope walk, attempting to adhere to sacred values associated with their social identities in a way that still satisfies their

need to interact with the finite material world around them. He argues that to manage this clash, people are easily swayed by attempts of elites to reframe sacred values as secular, or taboo trade-offs (between a sacred value and a material one) as tragic trade-offs, (between sacred values). As evidence he cites Baron & Leshner (1999) as well as one of his own studies (e.g., McGraw & Tetlock, 2005) where he found that apparently absolute opposition to selling body organs on the marketplace was substantially reduced when, for example, it was emphasized that this trade would save many lives.

My colleagues and I began our own body of research into sacred values with the observation that many behaviors in human history are carried out in spite of material concerns. Humans fight and kill in the name of abstract and often indefinable values - like god or country or history (Ginges & Atran, 2011; Atran & Ginges, 2012).

An initial goal of our research was to develop an experimental paradigm that could investigate the effect of material incentives to compromise over values considered sacred. Our experiments differed from previous psychological research into sacred or protected values which tended to use unrealistic hypothetical scenarios, often involving multiple values, in experiments run primarily with undergraduate students (Baron & Spranca, 1997; McGraw & Tetlock; 2005; Tetlock et al., 2000). While Tetlock (2003) described research that attempted to show reality constraints on sacred values, we were more interested in determining whether we could demonstrate the way sacred values often seemed to confound material interests. To do this we ran experiments using realistic hypothetical scenarios involving values that were central to the lives of our participants and their communities who were sampled from key populations involved in political disputes.

These experiments were first carried out in the West Bank and Gaza, where we sampled Jewish Israeli settlers, Palestinian refugees, and Palestinian university students, and tested the way different forms of incentives might influence the willingness of people to compromise their sacred values in the name of peace. I will describe the experiments run

with Israeli settlers in some detail. These experiments were run with a representative sample of 601 Jewish residents of the West Bank and Gaza, a population often called “settlers”. Settlers” is a term used to refer to Jewish Israelis who choose to live in territories that Israel occupied, but did not annex, after the 1967 war. The term “settler” in Hebrew is a contested one, which we use here for the sake of convenience. One experiment dealt specifically with the sacredness of “Eretz Israel” (“Land of Israel”). Eretz Israel includes but is not confined to the modern State of Israel. It is a much broader concept of land promised to the Jewish people, and has ambiguous boundaries. To determine which participants believed that the “Land of Israel” was a sacred value, we asked participants: “Do you agree that there are some extreme circumstances where it would be permissible for the Jewish people to give away part of the Land of Israel?”. Those who answered “No” (46%) expressed the belief that the integrity of the Land of Israel was an essential value that was closed to instrumental evaluation. Religious settlers were more likely than secular settlers to believe that the Land of Israel was a sacred value, and settlers with more education were less likely to believe the Land of Israel was a sacred value.

Our experiments were embedded within a larger survey, and their order within the survey was assigned randomly to each participant by using computer-assisted telephone interviewing, so that there were no order effects in responses. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experiments, and then were randomly assigned to respond to one of three different conditions within each experiment. In our analyses we pooled results across both experiments. In the “Land of Israel” experiment, participants were asked to imagine that the United States had organized a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians, and that the terms of the deal were the following:

*Israel would give up its sacred right to certain parts of Eretz Israel by giving up 99% of Judea, Samaria and Gaza.

*Israel would not be required to absorb ANY Palestinian refugees.

*There would be two states – a Jewish State of Israel and a Palestinian state.

Some participants received this deal (the “taboo condition”), others responded to the same deal with different added incentives. In one condition (“taboo+”), that incentive was material: participants were told that the United States would give Israel 1 billion dollars a year for 100 years. In another condition the incentive was purely symbolic (“symbolic”): participants were told that Palestinians would renounce their sacred value of the “right of return.” In this and other experiments we investigated whether the symbolic gesture might have some secondary material value by increasing participant’s trust that the other side would adhere to the deal, by asking participants to rate the extent to which they thought the deal would be peacefully and successfully implemented. In no experiments did the symbolic deal enhance a belief in implementability.

The second experiment dealt with the “right of return” for Palestinian refugees, which is another key issue in the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Most Palestinians regard as sacred the right of Palestinian refugees, and their descendants, to return to their former lands and homes in what is now the State of Israel. Most Israelis regard recognition of this right as an existential threat to their independence and, perhaps for this reason, participants in a pilot study reacted with such hostility to a sacred value question (“Do you agree that there are some extreme circumstances where it would be permissible for Israel to recognize the Palestinian right of return”) that we were required to drop the item from our survey. We did however include an experiment regarding the right of return, where participants were asked to imagine that the United States had organized a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians, and that the terms of the deal for those in the taboo condition were the following:

* Israel would be required to symbolically recognize the historic legitimacy of the right of

Palestinian refugees to return. However, Israel would not be required to absorb ANY Palestinian refugees.

* This treaty would result in two states – a Jewish State of Israel and a Palestinian state that would take up 99% of Judea, Samaria and Gaza

In the taboo+ condition, we offered the following material incentive: “In return, the people of the Jewish state of Israel would be able to live in peace and prosperity, free of the threat of war or terrorism.” In the symbolic condition, participants were told instead that: “On their part, Palestinians would be required to recognize the historic and legitimate right of the Jewish people to Eretz Israel.”

Because we were not able to ask the sacred values question relevant to Experiment 2, we used the sacred values question regarding Eretz Israel to compare “moral absolutist” (those for whom land was a sacred value) with “non absolutists.” We found no interaction, for any measure, between participant type (moral absolutists vs non absolutists), experiment (Land or Return) and experimental condition. Thus our analyses pooled results from both experiments.

After they heard about a hypothetical peace deal, we asked participants to describe their affective response, their support for violent opposition to the deal, and how implementable they believed the deal was. To measure emotional responses, participants were asked “which of the following words best describes how you would feel about an Israeli leader who would sign such a deal: pity, disgust, approval, anger, or neutral?” Because pretesting suggested that direct measures were unlikely to be answered by participants because of political and legal sensitivities, we used an indirect measure by asking participants to estimate the percentage of “typical settlers who would use violence to oppose this agreement.” This measure took advantage of the highly robust finding of a positive correlation between people's own opinions and preferences with their estimates of the relative frequency

of these opinions and preferences in the population (Marks & Miller, 1987). Thus, an expectation of levels of violence was used as an indirect measure of each participant's own preferences for violent responses.

We first tested the expectation that (i) across conditions, moral-absolutists would display more emotional outrage and support for violence than non-absolutists; (ii) moral-absolutists for whom deals involved compromises over sacred values would irrationally report more emotional outrage and greater support for violence when responding to taboo+ deals compared with taboo deals; and (iii) non-absolutists for whom peace deals involved compromises over strong preferences would rationally report less emotional outrage and support for violence in response to taboo+ deals compared with taboo deals because the former deals included added instrumental incentives. To test these hypotheses we used the following focused contrasts (weights in parentheses) to test the expectation of the following order between conditions: Sacred Value/Taboo+ (+3) > Sacred Value/Taboo (+1) > Preference/Taboo (-1) > Preference/Taboo+ (-3). This linear contrast proved statistically significant for measures of support for violence and emotional outrage.

While moral absolutist participants responded negatively to material incentives, we predicted that antagonism to taboo tradeoffs would decrease if tradeoffs involved equitable losses over sacred values by both sides. This hypothesis was motivated by the observation that people appear to have a desire for equitable outcomes with a disregard to instrumental consequences (Nowak, Page, & Sigmund, 2000). We reasoned that in the case of sacred values, the desire that the other side suffer equally meant that their loss must also be in the sacred domain. Thus, we predicted that those who hold sacred values would be less antagonistic to compromise over those values if the adversary suffers a similar loss over their own sacred values, even if the adversaries' loss does not instrumentally alter the compromise deal at hand. Indeed, moral-absolutists responding to the symbolic deals, compared with those responding to taboo and taboo+ deals, showed less emotional outrage

and support for violence.

These results provided the first evidence for what we were later to term the “backfire effect.” Our finding that offering participants materially improved deals increased hostility to compromise for moral absolutists, while decreasing hostility for non-moral absolutists suggested that people with a relevant sacred value will ignore reality constraints. Just as interesting, the results suggested that whereas sacred values might be protected from material trade-offs, symbolic trade-offs could lead to some flexibility.

Our findings with Israeli settlers were replicated in subsequent experiments with Palestinians that dealt with compromise about recognition of the Jewish state, compromise over the right of return, and Palestinian sovereignty over Jerusalem. We varied the nature of incentives (whether they were for the benefit of individual families or the Palestinian people), finding again that the better the material deal the worse the result when the deal involved a sacred value. In contrast, symbolic gestures that included an apology for past wrongs done to Palestinians had a strikingly positive effect, even when those apologies were offered in exchange for Palestinians compromising a sacred value.

After running these experiments, we interviewed 14 Palestinian and Israeli political leaders and we systematically included some of our trade-off scenarios (S Atran & Ginges, 2009). Responses were consistent with our previous findings, with one important difference. Previously, we had found that people with sacred values 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 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, as a beginning. But it’s not enough, because our houses and land were taken away from us and something has to be done about that.” Similarly, Binyamin Netanyahu (former Israeli opposition leader in parliament and current Prime Minister) 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 allow some border adjustments to prevent shoulder-fired missiles from reaching [sensitive installations and population centers].”

These experiments built on earlier research into sacred or protected values, by demonstrating that claims to sacred values were more than posturing. Although a large body of work into judgment and decision-making has demonstrated the ways in which normative rules of rationality are systematically violated when people make decisions aimed at achieving instrumental outcomes such as maximizing profit (Axelrod, 1984; Kahneman & Miller, 1986), our results showed that people with sacred values did not reason instrumentally. We were able to show that people with sacred values responded with greater hostility to compromises over those sacred values when such compromises included material sweeteners to the deal. In contrast, they responded with decreased hostility when the other side made symbolic gestures. We believed that these results have significant implications for understanding the trajectory of many cultural, resource, and political conflicts, implying that attempts to solve disputes in a bargaining setting by focusing on increasing the costs or benefits of different actions can backfire, if people conceived of the issue as sacred.

In many cases, sacred values have a long history and are embedded in religious narratives. In other cases mundane values can take on sacredness rather quickly, and

include values without obvious religious content, including activities (such as hunting a particular animal or farming a certain crop), or ideas (such as obtaining a nuclear weapon). A series of experiments led by Morteza Dehghani (Dehghani, Atran, Iliev, & Sachdeva, 2010; Dehghani, Iliev, & Atran, 2009) (Dehghani et al., 2009; 2010), tested the last notion by investigating the sacredness of the Iranian nuclear program. This research is notable for a number of reasons. First, it suggested that the nuclear program might be an emerging sacred value in Iran. This idea was grounded in the observation that while rhetoric concerning the Iranian nuclear program in the United States focused on consequences, in Iran government discussions of the nuclear program were embedded in narratives concerning national rights and past historical injustices. Attempting to replicate the backfire effect in this context testing for the effect with for relatively novel sacred values. A second noteworthy feature of these studies was the use of careful experimentation to isolate the specific aspect of the nuclear program that was sacred to many Iranians.

In one experiment (N=1418) conducted online in Farsi, 14% of participants regarded Iran's "nuclear energy program" to be sacred, reporting a belief that it should not be stopped "no matter how great the benefits are". Participants were randomly assigned to three conditions: taboo, taboo+, and taboo-. Those in the taboo condition read about the following hypothetical situation:

*Iran will give up its program for developing nuclear energy and surrender the current nuclear facilities to the UN; in return Israel will give up their program for developing nuclear energy and surrender the existing nuclear facilities to the UN.

Those in the taboo+ condition read about this deal, along with the material incentive of \$40 billion dollars given to Iran by the United Nations, while those in the taboo- condition were

instead given a material disincentive: "...if Iran does not accept this deal, the United Nations will impose additional sanctions on Iran." Participants then rated their willingness to accept the deal, and predicted how angry Iranians would be. As in the previous study, no difference was found in reaction to the different deals for participants without a sacred value. However for those with a sacred value a familiar story emerged; these participants responded to financial incentives *and disincentives* with less approval and more anger. Again, normative methods of applying influence to other parties in a dispute backfired.

A second experiment (N=579), replicated the experiment just described with one difference; it replaced "nuclear energy program" with "nuclear weapons program." Intriguingly, whereas a similar percentage regarded the nuclear weapons program to be a sacred value, in this case the backfire effect was not replicated. While different interpretations are available, the evidence suggests that those who hold the nuclear program as sacred do so not because of its ability to provide weapons of mass destruction, but for other reasons -- what the program implies about the independence and advancement of Iranian society. Other evidence supported this suggestion. Participants in the nuclear energy experiment, compared to those in the nuclear weapons experiment, showed stronger agreement with the idea that the nuclear program was needed for Iranians to be treated with respect, that the program was a religious duty and that it was an Iranian value. One interesting implication (apart from what this finding reveals about how Iranians think about developing their own nuclear capabilities) is that studying the backfire effect may provide important information regarding the nature of sacred issues in a given context. The typical measure of sacred values, where participants are asked whether they would compromise on something in return for great benefits is vulnerable to posturing. Studying the backfire effect negates this possibility and so can be used to reveal what aspects of an issue a population regards as sacred.

III. Neural representations of sacred values

One characteristic of our research program is that unlike work which begins in Europe or North America and then investigates a phenomenon in another culture, we began our research in the Middle East and only subsequently investigated sacred values in North America. In collaboration with Emory University (Berns et al., 2012), we recently investigated neural processing of sacred values. We utilized an experimental paradigm that used integrity as a proxy for sacredness and which paid money to induce individuals to sell their personal values. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), we presented participants with a set of values, asked them to choose between them, and then offered them a chance to sell off their choice. In the first “passive phase” of the experiment, participants were presented, under the scanner, with 124 statements involving 62 issues that ranged from items dealing with religious issues (e.g., belief in God) and moral issues (e.g., harming an innocent person) to the mundane (e.g., a preference for Macs over PCs). In subsequent phases participants were asked to choose between two pairs of statements (e.g., “You believe in God/You do not believe in God”), and were then asked if they would be willing to sell off their belief. For example, participants who did not believe in God (or who were “Mac people”) were asked to nominate a dollar amount to sign a paper disavowing their preference. Participants were given the option of opting out - refusing to nominate a monetary amount, which was taken as one indication of a sacred value. Out of the scanner, people were given the option of auctioning off their belief for any amount of money between \$1 and \$100. The higher the amount of money, the less chance they had of winning the money. Again, a decision not to participate was taken as an indication of a claim to a sacred value.

We were interested in distinguishing between two interpretations of sacred values. One interpretation of refusals to sell off sacred values is simply that people have not been offered enough money to do so. If a refusal to sell off a value was indicative of greater utility of that value, then passive processing of that value should be associated with greater activation in brain regions associated with processing utility, such as the ventromedial prefrontal cortex

(VMPFC), striatum/nucleus accumbens and parietal cortex. We found instead that sacred values were associated with increased activity in the left temporoparietal junction (TPJ) and ventrolateral prefrontal cortex (VLPFC), regions previously associated with semantic rule retrieval. This suggests that sacred values affect behavior through the retrieval and processing of deontic rules and not through a utilitarian evaluation of costs and benefits.

IV. Sacred values and the social contract: exit strategies and temporal perceptions

One of my claims is that sacred values serve a type of binding function, grouping people together with a commitment that goes beyond the social contract (J. A. Ginges & Atran, 2008; J. Ginges & Atran, 2009a, 2009b). If true, this suggests that sacred values would constrain the choices people see, blocking individual exit strategies from collective fates. In a recent study conducted with Palestinians, my colleagues and I examined this claim (Sheikh, Ginges, & Atran, 2013). We tested the idea that those who hold a sacred value may feel that their choices are constrained, and so may be more likely to reject individual exit strategies, even when those strategies are framed in terms of duties to the nation or to religion. We surveyed a representative sample of Palestinian adolescents in the West Bank and Gaza (cohort sampling, N = 555, ages 11-19 years, cohorts 12, 15, and 18 years, 50% female) in cooperation with the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research. All questions were tested for comprehension in a pilot study with adolescents in the same age range. Participants were interviewed at home, face-to-face, in Arabic by trained Palestinian interviewers. The relevant measures were embedded in a larger survey on political opinions, as part of which they were asked if they consider three core issues of the conflict as sacred (Jerusalem, Right of Return, Recognition of Israel).

Exit Strategies We presented our participants with two scenarios involving exit strategies. Participants were told to imagine that a new resistance to Zionist occupation had been organized. They were then presented with an exit strategy: we asked them if given the opportunity they would "make a Hajj to Mecca instead of staying to resist." Subsequently, they

were asked to imagine the same situation but this time with an opportunity to go "overseas to participate in a training program so that you can come back and serve your country."

Participants indicated if they would "seriously think about" taking the opportunity (response options: "yes", "no", "don't know").

Because refusing individual opportunities to exit the conflict is not tied to a specific sacred value. Therefore we compared moral absolutists, that is, those who held all issues we assessed (East Jerusalem, Right of Return, and Recognition of Israel) as sacred values (in our sample, 76%) to those who considered two or less of these issues sacred. The odds of moral absolutists to refuse making the Hajj over resisting Israeli occupation (75%) were greater by a factor of 1.49 as compared to those who did not consider all issues sacred (61%), $\chi^2(2) = 3.524$, $p_{\text{one-tailed}} = .030$. Similarly, the odds of moral absolutists to refuse going abroad for a training instead of joining the resistance (65%) were greater by a factor of 1.91 as compared to non-absolutists (56%), $\chi^2(1) = 9.364$, $p_{\text{one-tailed}} = .001$.

In sum, participants who held three conflict issues to be sacred were less likely than other participants to accept exit strategies, even when those strategies were framed in moral terms.

Temporal perception These results support the notion that sacred values constrain choices regarding appropriate behavior, but they do not tell us much about the mechanisms behind the results. One curiosity of sacred values is that they often appear quite abstract. The concepts of "god", "nation", "holiness" are difficult to define, and may gain some of their strength from their indefinable nature which makes them open to interpretation and reinterpretation (Atran & Ginges, 2012). In practice though, it is difficult to see how such abstract concepts could motivate people in the here and now. We posited that although sacred values appear to be abstract concepts, they are likely construed concretely by those who hold them, and tested that idea by looking at time perception. We reasoned that if people perceive sacred issues more concretely than non-sacred issues, those who construe issues

in a political conflict as sacred, may feel temporarily closer to “sacred” past and future events, effectively counteracting temporal discounting. We tested this idea as part of the same survey of Palestinians described above. To assess if sacred values change the perception about the distance of relevant events, we asked participants how close the “Nakba” (“Catastrophe,” referring to the exodus of Palestinians as a result of the foundation of Israel in 1948) felt to them (from 1 = “feels like yesterday” to 10 = “feels like distant past”) and how many years ago it happened. We also asked them to estimate how many years they thought it would take until Palestinians could “return to their former lands” in what now is Israel. As a point of comparison, we also asked them how close they felt the end of the Second World War (an event unlikely to invoke sacred values for our participants) felt to them, and how many years ago it was.

The majority of our participants considered the right of return sacred (84%). On average, participants felt moderately close to Nakba, $M = 4.66$, $SD = 2.97$ and not surprisingly the perceived the end of WWI as more distant than the Nakba, $M_{diff} = 1.88$, $SD_{diff} = 3.22$, $t(505) = 13.135$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.58$. While the temporal distance to Nakba was not related to the gender of the participants, older participants perceived the Nakba to be closer, $r = -.144$, $p < .001$. Also, participants living in Gaza perceived the Nakba as closer than did those living in the West Bank, $M_{diff} = 0.82$, $t(545) = 3.173$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.28$.

To test Hypothesis 2a, we ran an ANCOVA with temporal distance to Nakba as dependent variables, Sacredness (dichotomous: whether participant considered Right of Return sacred or not) as independent variable, and temporal distance to WWII as a covariate. There was a significant effect of the covariate on the distance to Nakba, $F(1, 503) = 85.493$, $p < .001$. Not surprisingly, participants who felt closer to the end of WWII also felt closer to the Nakba. In line with Hypothesis 2a, there was also a significant effect of Sacredness on the distance to Nakba, $F(1, 503) = 5.206$, $p = .023$: controlling for the distance to WWII, devoted actors felt $M_{diff} = 0.73$ points closer to the Nakba as compared to those who did not consider the right of

return sacred. This finding was robust even when age, gender, and West Bank versus Gaza were entered as controls.

Asked to estimate the years that have passed since the Nakba, a majority of participant gave an estimate very close to the correct amount of years (i.e., 63 years). Nevertheless, we repeated the same analysis, this time with years since Nakba as the dependent variable. Again, there was a significant effect of the covariate, $F(1, 452) = 31.816$, $p < .001$. The more years participants thought have passed since the end of WWII, the more years they thought have passed since the Nakba. However, controlling for the years since the end of WWII, there was no significant effect of Sacredness, $p = .965$: devoted actors did not differ from others when it comes to their estimates of the years that have passed since the Nakba.

Asked in how many years Palestinians will be able to return to their former lands, participants had the option to indicate “never.” The odds of answering “never” were higher by a factor of 1.68 for participants who did not consider the right of return sacred (26%), compared with those who regarded right of return as sacred (17%); $\chi^2(2) = 3.052$, $p_{\text{one-tailed}} = .040$. Among those who did expect Palestinians to return, devoted actors estimated that Palestinians will be able to return earlier ($M = 15.79$, $SD = 20.11$) than those who did not consider the Right of Return sacred ($M = 20.65$, $SD = 23.40$). This effect was only marginally significant, $t(358) = 1.594$, $p_{\text{one-tailed}} = .056$. Nevertheless, we can have fairly high confidence in this finding inasmuch as it did not include the people who thought Palestinians will never return to their former lands, and the proportion of such people was lower in devoted actors than in others.

Together the findings suggest that devoted actors feel events that are related to their sacred values to be closer, be it past or future events. However, this effect does not stem from a factual mistake on when past events historically took place (as devoted actors recalled the correct numbers of years since Nakba just as well as did others). Instead this

effect may be more likely due to a more concrete construal of such events (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Such a concrete perception of sacred values may be an important mechanism explaining the way sacred values constrain choices.

V. Conclusion

This chapter briefly outlines some recent research investigating the role of sacred values in shaping political life. Much of it was conducted in contexts of extreme conflict, principally because such cases include the best test cases for the idea that sacred values restrict our choices, binding us together in large groups of committed non-kin. The facts of war and martyrdom for imagined entities like god and flag might be seen by some as sufficient proof of the binding power of such values. Yet the studies described here provide empirical demonstrations that counter claims that sacred values are pseudo sacred. This research shows that people partition some values off from everyday values of the marketplace, refusing to consider them fungible with economic goods. This refusal is so strong, that even well meaning attempts to offer material incentives to compromise often backfire.

We need to know more about how people manage their commitments to sacred values. We know little, for example, concerning how people trade-off sacred values. While order of sacredness is sometimes formalized, as in the case of religion, in many cases people have to make novel decisions about which competing sacred values are more important. In the economic world, people make choices between things by weighing their value along a common scale such as money. The backfire effect shows this is unlikely to occur for sacred values, but it does not answer the question: How do people deal with tragic tradeoffs? We also know little about how we balance commitments to sacred ideals with our everyday responsibilities. Max Weber first posed this issue as the fundamental moral and practical challenge for anyone having “a vocation for politics” (Weber 1919/1994:368); and

formal investigations into sacred values have, from the beginning, asked how such values may be reconciled with the demands of everyday life (Baron & Leshner, 1999; Tetlock, 2003). Still, there has been little serious study of the dynamic relationship between deontological and instrumental reasoning in general and, in particular, of how political and advocacy groups manage values and responsibilities over time. This may prove a fruitful goal for future work.

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