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As diplomats stitch together a cease-fire between Hamas and Israel, the most depressing feature of the conflict is the sense that future fighting is inevitable. Rational calculation suggests that neither side can win these wars. The thousands of lives and billions of dollars sacrificed in fighting demonstrate the advantages of peace and coexistence, yet still both sides opt to fight.

This small territory is the world's great symbolic knot. "Palestine is the mother of all problems" is a common refrain among people we have interviewed across the Muslim world: from Middle Eastern leaders to fighters in the remote island jungles of Indonesia; from Islamist senators in Pakistan to volunteers for martyrdom on the move from Morocco to Iraq.

Some analysts see this as a testament to the essentially religious nature of the conflict. But research we recently undertook suggests a way to go beyond that. For there is a moral logic to seemingly intractable religious and cultural disputes. These conflicts cannot be reduced to secular calculations of interest but must be dealt with on their own terms, a logic very different from the marketplace or realpolitik.

Across the world, people believe that devotion to sacred or core values that incorporate moral beliefs - like the welfare of family and country, or commitment to religion and honor - are, or ought to be, absolute and inviolable. Our studies, carried out with the support of the National Science Foundation and the Defense Department, suggest that people will reject material compensation for dropping their commitment to sacred values and will defend those values regardless of the costs.

In our research, we surveyed nearly 4,000 Palestinians and Israelis from 2004 to 2008, questioning citizens across the political spectrum including refugees, supporters of Hamas and Israeli settlers in the West Bank. We asked them to react to hypothetical but realistic compromises in which their side would be required to give away something it valued in return for a lasting peace.

All those surveyed responded to the same set of deals. First they would be given a straight-up offer in which each side would make difficult concessions in exchange for peace, next they were given a scenario in which their side was granted an additional material incentive, and last came a proposal in which the other side agreed to a symbolic sacrifice of one of its sacred values.

For example, a typical set of trade-offs offered to a Palestinian might begin with this premise: Suppose the UN organized a peace treaty between Israel and the Palestinians under which

Palestinians would be required to give up their right to return to their homes in Israel and there would be two states, a Jewish state of Israel and a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. Second, we would sweeten the pot: In return, Western nations would give the Palestinian state \$10 billion a year for 100 years. Then the symbolic concession: For its part, Israel would officially apologize for the displacement of civilians in the 1948 war.

Almost everyone we surveyed rejected the initial solutions we offered - ideas that are accepted as common sense among most Westerners, like simply trading land for peace or accepting shared sovereignty over Jerusalem. Why the opposition?

Many of the respondents insisted that the values involved were sacred to them. For example, nearly half the Israeli settlers we surveyed said they would not consider trading any land in the West Bank - territory they believe was granted them by God - in exchange for peace. More than half the Palestinians considered full sovereignty over Jerusalem in the same light, and more than four-fifths felt that the "right of return" was a sacred value, too.

In general the greater the monetary incentive involved in the deal, the greater the disgust from respondents. This strongly implies that using the standard approaches of "businesslike negotiations" favored by Western diplomats will only backfire.

Many Westerners seem to ignore these clearly expressed "irrational" preferences, because in a sensible world they ought not to exist. Diplomats hope that peace and progress on material and quality-of-life matters will eventually make people forget the more heartfelt issues. But this is only a recipe for another Hundred Years' War - progress on everyday material matters will simply heighten attention on value-laden issues of "who we are and want to be."

Fortunately, our work also offers hints of another, more optimistic course.

Absolutists who violently rejected offers of money or peace for sacred land were considerably more inclined to accept deals that involved their enemies making symbolic but difficult gestures. For example, Palestinian hard-liners were more willing to consider recognizing the right of Israel to exist if the Israelis simply offered an official apology for Palestinian suffering in the 1948 war.

Similarly, Israeli respondents said they could live with a partition of Jerusalem and borders very close to those that existed before the 1967 war if Hamas and the other major Palestinian groups explicitly recognized Israel's right to exist.

Remarkably, our survey results were mirrored by our discussions with political leaders from both sides. For example, Mousa Abu Marzook (the deputy chairman of Hamas) said no when we proposed a trade-off for peace without granting a right of return. He became angry when we added in the idea of substantial American aid for rebuilding: "No, we do not sell ourselves for any amount."

But when we mentioned a potential Israeli apology for 1948, he brightened: "Yes, an apology is important, as a beginning. It's not enough, because our houses and land were taken away from us, and something has to be done about that." This suggested that progress on values might open the way for negotiations on material issues.

We got a similar reaction from Benjamin Netanyahu, the hard-line former Israeli prime minister. We asked him whether he would 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. He answered, "O.K., but the Palestinians would have to show that they sincerely mean it, change their textbooks and anti-Semitic characterizations."

Making these sorts of wholly intangible "symbolic" concessions, like an apology or recognition of a right to exist, simply doesn't compute on any utilitarian calculus. And yet the science says they may be the best way to start cutting the knot.

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