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“An ever-dying people: The existential underpinnings of Israelis’ perceptions of war and conflict”

Un peuple qui n’en finit pas de mourir : les fondements existentiels de la perception israélienne des guerres et conflit

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Le conflit entre l’État d’Israël et ses voisins implique des désaccords sur des questions concrètes telles que les colonies, le terrorisme et les frontières. Dans notre étude, nous soutenons que ces questions sous-jacentes correspondent à de profondes et tangibles préoccupations existentielles qui alimentent le conflit et ralentissent la réconciliation. Nous nous concentrons particulièrement sur l’état d’esprit des Juifs israéliens parce que nous croyons que l’histoire de la persécution contre les Juifs joue un rôle essentiel dans la façon dont les Israéliens perçoivent le conflit contemporain. Nous montrons, sur la base de la théorie de la gestion de la terreur (terror Management Theory) que les rappels de la mort ou la mort collective (la Shoah) conduisent les Israéliens à soutenir des solutions violentes, exprimer leur opposition au compromis et à la réconciliation, et entrainent un comportement moralement discutable en période de conflit. Nous concluons que la sécurité existentielle pour les Israéliens est une condition préalable à la paix.

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Simon Rawidowicz (1967) an American-Jewish scholar contended that « the world has many images of Israel, but Israel has only one image of itself: that of an expiring people, forever on the verge of ceasing to be » (p. 423). According to Abolof (2006), this primordial fear of death is the driving force, not just the outcome of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Thus, Jewish fear of collective annihilation is a crucial element in understanding the conflict between Israel and its neighbors. A better understanding of this collective terror may shed light on how Israel perceives the world around it, how it responds to threat, and how quite often it favors violent solutions that spiral out of control. Moreover, understanding the role of existential concerns in perpetuating violent responses in the context of ethno-political conflict is essential to creating conditions that may foster reconciliation and peace between Israel and its neighbors.

The current paper adds experimental meat to the theoretical bones proposed by Rawidowitz, and provides evidence to the contention that existential concerns are a driving force that perpetuates violent conflict, and stand in the way of resolving the Middle-East conflict. Specifically, on the basis of terror management theory (TMT: e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997), a social psychological theory concerned with the role of existential fear on social behavior, we will demonstrate how brief, unobtrusive reminders of personal or collective death significantly influence the way Israelis perceive their personal and collective security and their relations with their neighbors; lead Israelis to view the conflict in «black and white» terms; increase their opposition to concessions for peace; lead Israelis to favor violent solutions to conflict, and relax their moral restraints at times of war. However, we also demonstrate that providing existential security by various means may buffer against, and even overturn the detrimental effect of existential insecurities on intergroup conflict.

1. Why the rational solution doesn’t work

The dictum that « war itself is the enemy » attributed to the Prussian philosopher van Clausewitz, gains credence time and again following every round of violence between Israel and its adversaries which invariably result in significant losses to both sides with little gain, if any, to justify the price. The demonstrated futility of war and inability to subdue the other side using violent means should have logically led both sides to conclude that diplomacy, not violence may better serve their people. However, since the 1993 peace accord between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), attempts at peacemaking have only deteriorated relations between the groups. The Israeli disengagement from Gaza in the Summer of 2005 was intended to reduce friction between Israelis and Palestinians, but it failed to live up to its promise of breaking the cycle of violence and may have inadvertently contributed to the escalation of violent conflict. How can we explain that despite mounting evidence of the futility of violence there seems to be no end in sight to perpetual warfare? And why has every step taken toward peace paradoxically resulted in an escalation of conflict?
Many Israelis and Palestinians seem to believe that the other side has proven to be duplicitous, inhumane, and ruthless, using peace as a cover for malevolent intentions. Without dismissing the possibility that there might be some truth to these assertions, in the present paper we provide an alternative answer to these questions and argue that powerful psychological forces operate to sustain violent conflict and hamper the ability to achieve peace, even when peace seems to be a rational solution that would benefit both Israelis and Palestinians. The current paper focuses specifically on the psychological mindset of Israeli Jews, not because they bear more responsibility for the current state of affairs, but because they constitute a unique population with a long history of persecution giving rise to a «siege mentality» (Bar-Tal & Antebbi, 1992) which affects perceptions of the conflict and cannot be ignored when attempting to understand current affairs in the Middle-East. A better understanding of the role played by existential concerns in the political reasoning of Israeli Jews may provide insight into ways to move beyond violence and promote peace.

2. Terror management theory

According to terror management theory (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1997;), humans are caught in an intolerable paradox – they cherish life, but are aware of the fact that life is transient and temporary. The paradox is manifested in the instinctual drive to sustain life that is frustrated by the realization that efforts to hold on to life are doomed, at some point, to fail. The inability to escape this predestined fate could potentially render humans helpless and consumed with terror.

As there is no solution to the problem of death itself, humans have devised elaborate symbolic defense mechanisms that function to remove thoughts of death from conscious awareness. This denial of death, as Becker (1973) described it, is an ongoing dynamic process that functions to enable psychological equanimity and conscious oblivion. Based on these theoretical ideas, terror management theory postulates that two psychological constructs function as primary defense mechanisms against the anxiety associated with death awareness – cultural worldview validation and self-esteem enhancement. Embracing the cultural worldview or possessing high self-esteem is associated with more successful efforts at keeping death out of focal attention.

Worldviews are symbolic social constructions of reality that are specific to a certain culture and may be threatened by a different conception of reality that is not compatible with it. For this reason, terror management theory has suggested that the encounter with a worldview-denying other may be particularly threatening and may lead to distancing, derogation, and even aggression against the other, especially when death is salient (Greenberg et al., 1997).

3. Terror Management and Intergroup Conflict

Much of the focus of terror management research has been on intergroup relations, showing that the need to defend symbolic death-denying mental structures often
results in extreme reactions toward people who uphold different cultural, religious, or national worldviews (for a review, see Pyszczynski et al., 2003). For example, studies have shown that priming thoughts of death (i.e., mortality salience: MS) increases anti-Semitism and derogation of Jews among non-Jewish American participants (Cohen, Jussim, Harber, & Bhasin, 2009; Greenberg et al, 1990); leads American college students to behave more aggressively toward those with different political orientations than their own (McGregor et al., 1998), White Americans to express sympathy for a White racist (Greenberg et al., 2001), Italians to view their own nation as superior to other European countries (Castano, 2004), and even Israeli children as young as 11 to react more negatively to an immigrant child from Russia and more positively toward a child from Israel (Florian & Mikulincer, 1998).

These studies have consistently shown that brief, unobtrusive reminders of mortality lead people to view their group in a more positive light, and view other groups in a more negative light. Thus, it may seem that MS primes automatically activate ethnocentric, prejudiced, and violent responses. However, according to TMT, the effects of MS on intergroup attitudes are more complex, and may lead people to react in different ways, depending on individual differences and on the situational context (e.g., Arndt et al., 2002; Dechense et al., 2000).

In the context of political conflict, mortality reminders may stimulate support of violent solutions to conflict in some cases, but to a rejection of violent means in others. The research presented here will first show that reminding Israelis of their personal death or of collective annihilation (the Holocaust) increases support of violent solutions to conflict. We will demonstrate that this increased approval of violent means is often achieved by relaxing moral restraints. Then, additional research will be presented which outlines conditions that may disrupt the link between death concerns and support for violent solutions to conflict, and show that providing a sense of existential security whether by reducing Israelis’ sense of isolation from the world or by emphasizing a common humanity promotes more peaceful motives even when death is salient.

4. Personal Death, the Holocaust and Political Violence

Violent solutions to conflict offer hope for a clear-cut and long-lasting resolution of the conflict, inspire the belief that winners and losers can be pronounced, and that a better future lies ahead following victory. These attributes of political violence make it particularly attractive when death is salient, because under these conditions people are motivated to promote the triumph of their group and to thoroughly defeat the enemy (Hirschberger & Pyszczynski, 2009).

The first research on terror management and political violence among Israelis was conducted three months before Israel’s disengagement from the Gaza Strip. This research revealed that MS led Israeli settlers in the Gaza Strip and their supporters, who were in denial and did not want to come to terms with the 2005 disengagement plan, to support more violent resistance (Hirschberger & Ein-Dor, 2006). This research indicated that when people face the collapse of their
worldview they respond to subtle reminders of death with an increased proclivity to resort to violence.

Organized forms of violence, such as war and terrorism, depend to a large extent on the broad support of the populations for whom these actions are purportedly undertaken. Consensus for violent solutions to conflict may be established when people feel that they are fighting for a just and noble cause. However, just because a cause is noble does not mean it will be achieved using violent means, or that violence is the most effective route to attain the desired goal. Early scholars of war and conflict viewed the use of violence as a rational option that could advance a country’s interests, as Clausewitz (1832/1976) contended: “War is not a mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means,” implying that the decision to engage in war is the product of a rational cost-benefit analysis. From this perspective, war is waged when leaders conclude that war is a more efficient way to achieve political goals than other available means.

However, over the years scholars of conflict resolution have concluded that rational factors alone do little to explain the outburst of violent conflict, and that emotional and motivational factors such as anger, resentment, and revenge play a pivotal role in the decision to engage in war (e.g., Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2009; Baumeister & Butz, 2005). The decision to use violence in inter-ethnic conflict may be driven so powerfully by emotional factors such as anger, revenge, and the need to restore a sense of justice that utilitarian considerations such as whether war is a good instrumental means of achieving a desired outcome are ignored.

TMT provides an opportunity to move beyond a rational analysis of violent conflict to better understand the underlying motives that instigate violence, even when violence makes little rational sense. We argue that when death is salient, justice motives gain prominence and may override utilitarian considerations to the extent that violence may be exercised even when it is clearly counter to rational self-interest.

In a series of 4 studies (Hirschberger, Pyszczynski, & Ein-Dor, 2010), we examined whether MS would increase justice motives for violence and whether the motivation to achieve or restore justice would be greater than rational utilitarian considerations. In Study 1, Israeli participants were randomly assigned to MS and control conditions and then read a description of a missile attack from the Gaza strip on an Israeli town. Some participants were told that security experts believed that a military incursion into Gaza was likely to significantly diminish Hamas’ ability to fire more missiles (utility condition). Other participants were told that security experts believed that an incursion into Gaza would not reduce Hamas’ ability to fire more missiles, nor would it effectively deter Hamas, but it would restore a sense of justice to the Israeli public (justice condition). All participants were asked to indicate their support for a military incursion into Gaza. The results revealed that in both the justice and utility conditions MS led to greater support of a military strike. These findings suggest that reminders of death increase support of violence, not only when violence has a clear purpose and is executed to obtain
a concrete result, but also when violence is considered to be ineffective, but will contribute to feelings of greater justice.

The findings of this initial study indicated that MS leads to greater support of violence for both justice and utility reasons, but they did not indicate whether justice motives are more prominent than utility motives when death is salient. In the next study we developed a scale, the Justice, Utility, and Peace Inventory (JUPI), to measure justice and utility motives for violence, which would enable us to measure these motives within each subject rather than manipulate them between subjects as in Study 1.

Based on this second study, we examined the impact of MS on JUPI factors. Following the MS procedure, participants were instructed to read a description of a missile attack from Gaza on an Israeli town, as in the first study. However, half of the participants read that the attack resulted only in some minor damage and no casualties (mild outcome condition), and the other half read the description used in the first study wherein several people were killed or wounded during the attack (severe outcome condition). Then all participants completed the JUPI. Results revealed that in the mild outcome condition MS had no significant impact on the JUPI. However, in the severe outcome condition MS led to greater endorsement of the justice factor compared to the control condition. There was no significant effect of MS on the utility and peace items.

The results of this study indicate that when participants are given the opportunity to endorse both justice and utility items, MS has a significant effect only on the justice items and not on the utility items. Furthermore, the impact of MS on justice motives for violence was evident only when the outcome of the attack was severe and not when it was mild. Perhaps for MS to increase justice motives one needs to be in an enraged state of mind that overrides rational considerations.

To test this possibility, participants in a fourth study first read an essay that either recommended making decisions based on rational considerations or an essay that argued that decisions are best made on an emotional, intuitive basis. Then participants completed the MS procedure and read a description of a panel of experts unanimously concluding that the appropriate response to a recent terrorist attack in Tel-Aviv would be a limited attack targeting only the person responsible for the terrorist attack, rather than engaging in a full-scale attack against Gaza. Following this description, participants were asked to indicate whether, given the choice, they would favor a limited attack, as recommended, or a full scale attack; and they were asked to indicate to what extent they felt confident about their choice. Thus, MS, cognitive mode, and decision regarding the type of attack served as the independent variables. The level of confidence they expressed in the decision they made served as the dependent variable. Results revealed that participants who favored a limited attack were not significantly affected by experimental conditions. However, among those favoring a full-scale attack, MS led to greater support of an attack when participants were induced to make decisions based on emotions and intuitions. The results of this study suggest that confidence in the decision to
endorse a full-scale attack that is considered by experts to be counter-productive is greater under MS conditions, but only after participants are induced to think with their gut rather than their mind.

Rallying public support for a war not only requires that people perceive the cause as just and view their group as representing forces of good fighting against evil. People also need to believe that there is no alternative, and that war is imminent and unavoidable. Indeed, research indicates that when violence seems inevitable MS leads to greater support of violent solutions to conflict. In one study (Hirschberger et al., 2009, Study 1), MS led to greater support of a pre-emptive strike against Iran after participants read a speech that was purportedly delivered by an Iranian leader calling for the destruction of the State of Israel and for the continued development of Iran’s nuclear program. In a similar study (Hirschberger et al., 2009, Study 3), Israelis who lived in a region attacked by missiles during the 2006 Lebanon war expressed greater support of a pre-emptive strike against Hezbollah following MS, but only if they first read a passage describing Hezbollah as preparing for an imminent war with Israel.

Thus far, we have shown that making thoughts of personal death salient increases support for violent solutions to conflict among Israelis. This body of research confirms our contention that existential concerns lie at the heart of violent conflict, however, this research does not yet address our claim that for Israelis existential concerns operate not just on the individual level, but also and maybe primarily on the group level and that thoughts of group annihilation should have a powerful effect on Israelis’ political reasoning. To investigate this question we embarked on a program of research which involved priming thoughts of the Holocaust and examining the effects of these primes on: (a) support for a pre-emptive strike on Iran; (b) support for a raid on the Gaza strip; (c) feelings of guilt towards the Palestinians; and (d) the moral licensing of civilian casualties during conflict.

In the first two studies in this research we used the same methods we had used to prime thoughts of personal death to prime thoughts of the Holocaust and compared these primes to the conventional MS prime and to a control pain-salience condition. Results indicated that both MS and Holocaust-salience primes increased support for a pre-emptive strike on Iran and increased support for harsh military measures against the Palestinians in Gaza. However, there were some differences between the effects of the MS and Holocaust-salience primes. First, thoughts of the Holocaust seemed to have a stronger effect than the MS prime on support of violence. A subsequent study indicated that thoughts of the Holocaust also increased the accessibility of death-related thoughts even beyond that of the typical MS prime. Second, in all of our MS studies on political conflict conducted in Israel, political orientation never significantly moderated the effects of the MS prime. However, when Israeli participants were primed to think about the Holocaust and answer questions about feelings of guilt towards the Palestinians political orientation was a significant moderator. Specifically, primes of the Holocaust made left- but not right-wing Israelis experience more guilt towards the Palestinians.
Our next step was to examine whether this difference between left- and right-wing Israelis in guilt towards the Palestinians would also be manifested in the licensing of morally questionable behaviors such as the killing of innocent civilians during conflict. Moreover, we were interested in examining whether the salience of moral values might moderate this effect. Participants were first assigned to read a Talmudic passage which either characterizes the Jewish people as a charitable and compassionate nation (moral condition) or a passage warning against displaying too much compassion and advising that showing compassion to the cruel is akin to being cruel to the compassionate (control condition). Then participants were assigned to either a Holocaust salience or a control pain salience condition and they answered questions on the justification of civilian casualties during conflict.

Among participants who were not primed with moral identity, those with a right-wing orientation responded to the Holocaust prime by rating civilian casualties as more justified than those with a left-wing political orientation. These findings complement our earlier findings on guilt towards the Palestinians and indicate that right-wing Israelis do not respond to Holocaust primes with increased guilt but rather with greater justification of civilian casualties, and left-wing Israelis respond to these primes with increased guilt and with opposition to civilian casualties during conflict. However, much to our initial dismay, the moral identity primes increased justification of civilian casualties in the Holocaust salience condition among left-wing participants to the level expressed by right-wing participants. It appears that moral identity primes had a paradoxical effect on the resolution of moral dilemmas by reducing the discrepancy between participants desire to view themselves as moral, and the morally questionable attitude that Palestinian civilian casualties are acceptable. These findings are consistent with recent research in the field of morality showing that priming moral identity may have the paradoxical effect of licensing immoral behavior (e.g., Mazar & Zhong, 2010; Monin & Miller, 2001). It appears that people are motivated to perceive themselves as moral and not necessarily behave morally. Once they receive positive feedback on their moral stature their motivation to behave morally may be diminished.

The findings on the effects of the Holocaust on perceptions of violent conflict made us wonder whether there are limiting factors to the effect of the Holocaust on the support of political violence. In the next study we examined whether Holocaust primes would be effective instigators of extreme violence especially when Israelis feel criticized and isolated. In this study we asked participants whether they support a pre-emptive strike on Iran under two different conditions. In the first condition they were told that American President Obama recognizes Israel’s right to defend itself and supports any act Israel deems necessary to protect it from threat. In the second condition participants were told that President Obama warned Israel not to attack Iran and expressed his strong opposition to any act of aggression against Iran. Results indicated that primes of the Holocaust significantly increased support of a pre-emptive strike on Iran when told that the US was opposed to such action. When the US approved the military strike, however, thinking about the Holocaust no longer had a significant effect. These findings reveal the link between Israelis’ fear
of annihilation and their siege mentality, such that feelings of isolation perpetuate existential anxieties, but also shows that even the slightest display of approval reassures Israelis and leads to more measured and less emotional responses.

5. Self-protective concerns and symbolic defenses

The aforementioned study on perceptions of isolation among Israelis suggests that under certain conditions existential concerns may not necessarily lead to greater violent inclinations. To further explore the conditions that may attenuate or even reverse the effects of existential concerns on support of violence we considered the fact that real-life conflict poses not only symbolic threats to worldviews and beliefs, but also real threats to physical integrity and to life itself. Namely, as much as people engaged in conflict are concerned about protecting their symbolic death-denying structures, so too are they concerned with their own physical safety. Reminders of personal mortality have been shown in past research to engage the motivation to defend the worldview, but it is also very likely that they bring to mind the possibility of dying in a war. What determines people’s choice of war or peace when mortality is salient?

We reasoned that real life political conflict involves an interplay of motivations that include the motivation to uphold and defend cherished cultural values as well as heightened vigilance for personal safety and security. At times these different motivations may conflict such as when fighting for a valued cause compromises physical security. We contended that when death is salient the motivation to defend the self may take precedence over the defense of the worldview when: (a) perceived personal vulnerability to conflict-related injury or death is high; (b) adversary rhetoric raises the possibility of a non-violent solution; (c) experts advise that violence is counter-productive; and (d) people are induced to think rationally.

To examine the role of perceived vulnerability and adversary intent in moderating the link between MS and political violence, we (Hirschberger et al., 2009) conducted a series of studies to examine the dynamic interplay between symbolic terror management defenses, concrete self-protection from physical danger, and their effects on support of violent solutions to political conflict. In Study 1, we focused on the growing tensions between Israel and Iran over the development of Iran’s nuclear program. Participants completed the typical MS procedure and were then randomly assigned to read either a conflict-escalating speech by an Iranian leader against Israel and the West, or a conflict de-escalating speech that implies that violence is not inevitable. Participants then rated their support of a pre-emptive nuclear strike on Iran. Results revealed that in the escalating-rhetoric-scenario condition, MS increased support of extreme violence against Iran, but in the de-escalating scenario the opposite pattern was observed, and MS decreased support of extreme pre-emptive violence relative to the control condition.

Our interpretation of the results of this study was that when there were reasons to believe that violence might be averted, the need for personal safety overrode the defense of the symbolic worldview, and the motivation for violence was reduced. To further test this explanation, we manipulated personal vulnerability in Study
2. Following the MS procedure and a description of the current state of tensions with Iran, participants were randomly assigned to two groups. The first group was asked to reflect on the possibility that they or their loved ones might be hurt in a future conflict between Iran and Israel. The second group was asked to reflect on the content of the passage. All participants then completed the same measure as in Study 1. Results revealed that participants who reflected only on the content of the passage responded to MS with increased support for pre-emptive violence. However, participants who reflected on their personal vulnerability to conflict-related harm responded to MS with decreased support for pre-emptive violence.

In the following study (Study 3), rather than manipulating personal vulnerability as in Study 2, we chose to focus on two groups of participants that differed in their level of exposure to war-related violence (matched on other potentially confounding variables). The first group consisted of participants who lived in Northern Israel during the Second Lebanon War against Hezbollah (summer, 2006) and had directly experienced missile attacks. The second group consisted of participants who lived in other parts of Israel and had never been directly exposed to conflict-related violence. All participants completed the MS procedure and then read either a conflict-escalating speech or a conflict de-escalating speech by a leader of Hezbollah, and answered questions on support of a pre-emptive attack against Hezbollah.

Results revealed that for participants in the no-war-exposure group, MS led to greater support of violence regardless of Hezbollah rhetoric. However, among participants in the war-exposure group, MS led to greater support of violence in the escalation scenario, but led to reduced support of violence among participants in the de-escalation scenario. These findings suggest that among persons who feel less vulnerable to conflict-related violence, MS leads to increased support of violence regardless of whether the adversary’s rhetoric is peaceful or belligerent. However, among participants who had experienced the war first hand, the influence of MS on support of violence was contingent upon adversary rhetoric: When it seemed that war was imminent, it increased support of violence, but when war seemed avoidable it had the opposite effect and reduced support of violence.

Similar findings were obtained in the aforementioned research on justice and utility motives for violence (Hirschberger et al., 2010). In Study 1 which measured whether utilitarian and justice motivations for violence would increase support of violence under MS conditions, a third group of participants were told that security experts believed that an incursion into Gaza would be counter-productive and was likely only to increase attacks against Israel (futility of violence condition). Counter to the other conditions, in this group MS significantly reduced support for political violence. In Study 3 of this research, which examined whether inducing rational or intuitive thinking influences the impact of MS on support of massive violent retribution, we not only found that MS led to greater support of a full-fledged attack against Gaza when participants were induced to decide intuitively and emotionally, as previously mentioned. We also found that when participants were induced to think rationally, MS reduced support of violent retributions.
6. Common Humanity

The next series of studies set out to examine whether non-violence in the face of death may be achieved not just on the basis of practical self-protective concerns, but also by bringing to light common human values. In a study examining support of political violence in a sample of Israelis (Hirschberger, Pyszczynski, & Ein-Dor, 2009b) participants were assigned to either an MS condition, a pain salience condition, a “Holocaust as a crime against the Jewish people” condition, or a “Holocaust as a crime against humanity” condition (Based on Wahl & Branscombe, 2005). They then answered questions tapping support of violent solutions to conflict. In the MS condition and the “Holocaust as a crime against the Jewish people” condition, support of violence was significantly higher compared to the pain salience condition and the “Holocaust as a crime against humanity” condition. These results suggest that describing the Holocaust as a crime against the Jewish people led to effects similar to MS. However, framing the Holocaust as a crime against humanity reduced support for violent solutions to ethno-political conflict, probably because such portrayal of the Holocaust induced a sense of common humanity. These findings indicate that the Holocaust triggers «siege mentality» responses only when Israeli Jews feel alone in their trauma. Even the slightest suggestion that the Holocaust is an offense against all of humanity, however, moderates this response and quells violent reactions.

In a more direct test of the effects of inducing a sense of common humanity on the death-political violence link, Pyszczynski et al., (2010) found that inducing Palestinian citizens of Israel, or Israeli Jews to consider the shared global consequences of climate change reversed the increase in support for violence that MS produced under control conditions so that MS increased support for peace – and that these effects emerged even during the height of the Israeli military action in Gaza in 2009. These findings suggest that in addition to increased hostility toward outgroup members, reminders of death also encourage greater adherence to fundamental cultural values, which in most cases includes sanctions against violence and encouragement of compassionate treatment of others.

7. Conclusion

In a recent New York Times editorial, columnist Roger Cohen discussed the unique state of mind of the Jewish people (Cohen, October, 2009). A state of mind borne from a history of persecution but that has taken hold of the Israeli psyche, even now that Jews are independent and free. «Israel does not see itself as normal» he claims «rather, it lives in a perpetual state of exceptionalism.» This exceptionalism, as we have demonstrated in our research may sometimes lead to real or imagined isolation. And the sense of being ostracized from the international community may bring about further acts that show disdain to global public opinion. Cohen contends that the source of this exceptionalism is the deep-seated existential fear of Israeli Jews which he terms «annihilation psychosis.»
The research presented here on the existential underpinnings of Israelis’ political attitudes provide support to the claim that fear of individual and group annihilation lie at the heart of conflict-escalation. However, we also show that the link between existential concerns and support of violence is not deterministic and is not inevitable. Most importantly, we show that just as a sense of isolation from the international community amplifies Israelis’ support of violent responses to existential threat, so does a sense of being part of a common humanity attenuate the proclivity for violent solutions and increases support for peaceful measures. We believe that these conclusions have important policy implications for nations and organizations interested in promoting peace. Specifically, our research suggests that attempts to isolate Israel, boycott Israeli institutions, or otherwise «punish» Israel for its policies towards the Palestinians is not conducive to peace and will likely backfire and promote greater violence. The path to peace, it seems, must be paved with existential security for Israelis. Security in this case is not limited to the concrete, physical security often emphasized in the context of conflict resolution. This sense of security cannot be established with weapons or financial aid. Rather, existential, psychological security is the knowledge that the world recognizes Israel’s basic rights and will support Israel when it makes concessions and takes the necessary risks. Then, when the siege mentality is lifted will Israel feel confident enough to make peace with its neighbors.
Bibliographie

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