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God or Country? Fusion With Judaism Predicts Desire for Retaliation Following Palestinian Stabbing Intifada

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Abstract

Research indicates that existential threat may motivate in-group members to retaliate against out-group members. Less is known about the impact of alignment with one's religious or national group on retaliatory activity. We addressed this deficiency in a longitudinal study before, and soon after, the beginning of the 2015 Palestinian Stabbing Intifada—a terror wave that is still ongoing. We assessed the predictive power of Israeli's "identity fusion" (a visceral, family like bond to a group) to either religion or country. We found that fusion with religion (rather than country) predicted endorsement of retaliatory activity, especially after the intifada began. This pattern persisted even when controlling for rival measures such as religiosity, fundamentalism, and conservatism. Apparently, even in relatively secular Israel, ideological commitments to religion foment retaliatory activity that may precipitate further aggression. Future interventions might therefore address issues pertaining to religious identities, even when the conflict appears political or territorial.

Keywords

group processes, intergroup relations, self/identity

Retaliation begets retaliation. Although participants in intractable conflicts often recognize this, retaliate is precisely what they do. Past research has suggested that allegiances to social identities may be a key motivator of such retaliation (e.g., Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Hamberger, & Niens, 2006; Kelman, 1999). Nevertheless, much remains to be learned regarding the precise nature of these identities (Livingstone & Haslam, 2008). One important challenge is learning how these identities interact with established predictors of retaliation, such as existential threat posed by the out-group (Canetti-Nisim, Halperin, Sharvit, & Hobfoll, 2009), to produce cycles of violence (Haushofer, Biletzki, & Kanwisher, 2010). To illuminate these issues, we conducted a longitudinal study of Israelis during the Palestinian terror wave—the "Stabbing Intifada"—that began in 2015. The study examined whether identity fusion with religion, identity fusion with country, and existential threat predicted endorsement of retaliatory activity.

Identity Fusion and Social Identity Approaches to Intergroup Conflict

Identity fusion refers to an unusually strong, visceral bond with a group (Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales & Huici, 2009; Swann, Jetten, Gomez, Whitehouse & Bastian, 2012). It emphasizes aspects of alignment with the groups that are specifically downplayed by a related construct, identification. Consider, for example, social identity theory's (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) conceptualization of group behavior. Within this framework, progroup behavior is motivated by social identities (i.e., collective ties to the group category) rather than personal identities or relational ties to fellow group members. In contrast, strongly fused persons are motivated by personal, as well as social, identities, and by relational, as well as collective, ties. Strongly fused persons should therefore be more inclined to engage in progroup behavior than strongly identified persons. Moreover, these qualitative differences between fusion and identification mean that it is inappropriate to regard fusion as merely strong identification. By analogy, galloping is more than "fast walking" because when horses begin to gallop, they change their gait, become momentarily airborne, and activate fast-twitch rather than slow-twitch muscle fibers.

Abundant evidence supports the notion that identity fusion is a stronger predictor of progroup activities than identification, particularly when the behavior is extreme. For example, data from six continents showed that strongly fused persons were

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particularly inclined to endorse fighting and dying for their country (Swann, Buhrmester, et al., 2014). Furthermore, when strongly fused persons (but not identified persons) learned that a group member was imperiled, they became highly emotional. These emotional reactions predicted willingness to sacrifice themselves to save the group member (Swann, Gómez, et al., 2014). Other research demonstrated that the effects of fusion (but not identification) on progroup behavior were mediated by relational ties to group members (Buhrmester, Fraser, Lanman, Whitehouse, & Swann, 2014; Swann, Buhrmester, et al., 2014) and perceptions of personal agency (Gómez et al., 2011; Swann et al., 2009). Furthermore, these effects are driven by mechanisms unique to identity fusion theory, such as personal identities (Gomez et al., 2011; Swann et al., 2009) and relational ties (Fredman et al., 2015; Swann et al., 2012). Of particular interest here, identity fusion has been implicated in conflicts in the Middle East. For example, strongly fused persons were especially inclined to serve as front-line combatants during the 2011 Libyan revolution (Whitehouse, McQuinn, Buhrmester, & Swann, 2014).

Fusion in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

Whereas the focus of past research on identity fusion has been on *intra*group relations—specifically, the sacrifices people make for the in-group—here we focus on *inter*group relations. In particular, we examined the relationship of fusion to endorsement of retaliatory policies against the out-group in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Although a few studies of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict have examined harsh forms of retaliation against the out-group (Halperin, 2011; Halperin, Porat, Tamir, & Gross, 2013; Hammack, Pilecki, Caspi, & Alexander, 2011; Maoz & Eidelson, 2007; Maoz & McCauley, 2011; Schori-Eyal, Halperin, & Bar-Tal, 2014), none have examined the role of identification or identity fusion in predicting such retaliation. In addition, most researchers have focused on positive or mildly negative responses to provocations by the out-group. These include conciliatory policies (e.g., Maoz & McCauley, 2005), social distancing (e.g., Rosenmann, 2015), exclusionist political attitudes (e.g., Halperin, Canetti-Nisim, & Hirsch-Hoefler, 2009), and negative emotions (e.g., Halperin, 2008). We sought to use identity fusion to predict endorsement of *extreme* retaliatory measures. Previous research indicates that this is a task for which measures of identity fusion are ideally suited (Fredman et al., 2015; Whitehouse et al., 2014).

The current research was also designed to determine whether fusion with religion versus fusion with a nation best predicted endorsement of extremely hostile actions toward an out-group. We suspect that carefully orchestrated religious rituals reinforce Judaism in ways for which there is no counterpart involving the state of Israel. These religious rituals are repeated throughout the year during family holidays, thereby leveraging family ties to amplify the psychological impact of the ideologies communicated through the rituals. By promoting a feeling of oneness with both the family and religious community, rituals may cause participants to view members of the community as kindred spirits who share common values (Swann, Buhrmester, et al., 2014). As kindred spirits, these individuals are entitled to protection against threats from out-groups who have different values. Although there have been no direct tests of this proposition, some evidence indicates that there may be a link between participation in religious rituals, relational ties, fusion, and progroup activity. For example, there is evidence that rituals can foment fusion (e.g., Whitehouse et al., 2016) and that relational ties to the group mediate the effects of fusion on sacrifice for the group (Buhrmester et al., 2014; Swann, Buhrmester, et al., 2014). Evidence also suggests that religious activity fosters group solidarity more effectively than secular activity. For instance, frequency of praying together is a stronger predictor of in-group cooperation among Israeli kibbutz members than the frequency of eating together (Sosis & Ruffle, 2003). Even more relevant, engaging in religious rituals predicted endorsement of extreme out-group hostility toward out-group members (Ginges, Hansen, & Norenzayan, 2009). Together, this evidence suggests that fusion with religion may be a particularly powerful predictor of efforts to protect the in-group through hostility toward the out-group.

Evidence that identity fusion predicts endorsement of extreme policies may have practical implications. That is, when the populace endorses policies that involve extremely hostile actions against an out-group, politicians are emboldened to translate these policies into reality (Maoz & McCauley, 2005).

Of course, fusion with religion is not the only potential predictor of endorsement of extreme hostility toward out-groups. One alternative predictor is existential threat from the out-group. For example, existential threat from Palestinians has been shown to increase endorsement of hostile behavior by Israelis (e.g., Canetti-Nisim et al., 2009). To assess the impact of existential threat, past researchers have compared responses during peaceful versus turbulent periods (e.g., Halperin et al., 2009; Livingstone & Haslam, 2008; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006). We adopted this approach in our research. Specifically, we conducted a prospective study in which Israeli participants responded during a relatively peaceful period and then again during the Palestinian Stabbing Intifada.

Two additional established predictors of hostility toward out-groups are conservatism (Maoz & McCauley, 2005; Zavala, Golec, Cislak, & Wesolowska, 2010) and religious fundamentalism (RF; Kirkpatrick, 1993). We accordingly controlled for each of these constructs in our main investigation. Finally, because group identification has also played a key role in studies of intergroup relations in the past, we compared the predictive utility of fusion and identification in two preliminary investigations. We discovered that fusion was a superior predictor of hostility toward the out-group than identification.[1]

In designing our research, we sought to incorporate three methodological refinements over past work. First, to make a stronger case that fusion played a causal role in our outcome measures, we used a longitudinal design which enabled us to assess the relationship between fusion at one time point and the

outcome measures at a second time while controlling for fusion and the outcome measures at Wave 1. Second, whereas past researchers (e.g., Atran, Sheikh, & Gomez, 2014) have used different methodologies to assess alignment with country (e.g., fusion with country) and causes (e.g., sacred values, RF), we used parallel measurement instruments to assess fusion with group versus fusion with religious cause. This approach allowed for direct comparison of the relative strength of the two constructs that was not confounded with methodology. Third, whereas past research in the Mideast has been marred by the use of single item measures of questionable reliability and validity (e.g., Maoz & McCauley, 2008; Maoz, 2003), our multiple-item instruments were well validated.

Method

A longitudinal design assessed the responses of a sample of Israelis in two waves: July 5, 2015, and October 21/22, 2015. The timing of data collection constituted our measure of existential threat. That is, July was a period of relative calm during which Palestinians wounded only three and murdered two Israelis. October was well into the Stabbing Intifada that began in early September. This period was marked by intensified attacks, with Palestinians wounding 77 and murdering 9. To test our assumption that the Intifada inspired existential threat, independent judges examined newspapers (*Haaretz* and *Jerusalem Post*) published during the 3 weeks preceding the two waves. Consistent with expectation, relative to the articles published during June/July, the articles published during October conveyed a higher level of threat, $t(45) = -2.45$, $p = .02$. Moreover, the term "terror wave" appeared significantly more times prior to Wave 2 as compared to Wave 1, $t(44.755) = -3.65$, $p = .001$.

Participants

A sample of Israeli residents participated in two waves through an Israeli sampling service (Midgam Panel) as part of a larger, two-wave, study. We used quota sampling. This technique guaranteed representativeness on sex and age and approached representativeness on religiosity, geographical regions, and formal education (although the sampling service sends invitations to participants who are representative on all the foregoing dimensions, they guarantee representativeness on age and sex only). Based on previous research on identity fusion, we estimated that 200 participants would provide sufficient power, but given the longitudinal component of the design, we decided to recruit as many participants as possible during the first wave (but no more than 300, which we deemed excessive). Although all but five participants completed both waves of the study ($N = 225$ and 220; Waves 1 and 2, respectively; $M_{age} = 39.93$; 54.2% women), we removed 44 participants for two reasons. First, we removed 27 participants because identical IP addresses from two successive surveys raise the possibility that a single respondent completed the survey twice. Second, we deleted respondents (2 from Wave 1 and 15 from Wave 2) who failed our attention check (an item embedded in the survey stating: "if you are reading this, please respond 'mostly agree'"). Note also that the degrees of freedom associated with the analyses vary slightly because participants occasionally failed to complete all measures.

Procedure

A bilingual individual translated the original English scales into Hebrew, and a second bilingual individual back-translated the scales and evaluated the translations to affirm equivalency. Participants began by completing two separate, 7-item measures of identity fusion (Gómez et al., 2011), with one tapping fusion with Judaism ($\alpha = .96$, $M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.84$) and the other tapping fusion with Israel ($\alpha = .90$, $M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.17$). On scales ranging from 1 to 7, participants indicated their agreement with items such as "I have a deep emotional bond with (Judaism–Israel)," and "I am one with (Judaism–Israel)." Participants' fusion with Israel and fusion with Judaism were moderately correlated both at wave 1 ($r[181] = .49$, $p < .01$), as well as wave 2 ($r[181] = .53$, $p < .01$). In addition, participants completed a 4-item measure of hostility toward the out-group ($\alpha = .81$, $M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.65$). To assess endorsement of retaliatory policies, on scales ranging from 1 to 7, participants indicated agreement with the following: "Israel should recapture the Gaza strip and deport all Palestinians" and "Even after the end of the military operations, Israel should stop providing the Palestinians with different types of aid." To assess reports of retaliatory behaviors, participants reported whether they publically voiced support for violence against Arabs or avoided either hiring Arabs or patronizing their businesses.

Finally, we added several rival predictors. We considered RF (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992) and conservatism (Rosenmann, 2015), the primary rival predictors because they have been shown to be effective in predicting extreme hostility toward out-groups. Political conservatism was measured as a composite of 3 items: political affiliation on economic, social, and security issues ($\alpha = .82$, $M = 6.53$, $SD = 2.10$). We included the primary rival predictors in the main analyses. Two ancillary measures of religiosity were also included, intrinsic religiosity (IR; Hoge, 1972) and a single item religiosity measure (how religious are you?). Adding these items to the main analyses revealed that they were not significant predictors nor did they change any of our findings. We therefore will not discuss them further.

Results

Linear regressions tested whether Wave 1 fusion with Judaism and Israel predicted an increase in hostility from Wave 1 to Wave 2, controlling for age, sex, and socioeconomic status (SES). When entered with only the demographics, Wave 1 fusion with religion significantly predicted hostility during Wave 2, $b = .42$, $t(181) = 8.10$, $p < .001$, even when controlling for Wave 1 hostility, $b = .19$, $t(180) = 5.06$, $p < .001$.

A parallel analysis revealed that although Wave 1 fusion with Israel predicted Wave 2 hostility toward the out-group, $b = .35$, $t(181) = 3.83$, $p < .001$, this effect vanished when we controlled for Wave 1 hostility, $b = .08$, $t(180) = 1.38$, $p = .17$. When both fusion measures were entered simultaneously while controlling for Wave 1 hostility and demographics, fusion with religion was a significant predictor of Wave 2 hostility, $b = 0.21$, $t(179) = 4.91$, $p < .001$, but fusion with Israel was not, $b = -0.05$, $t(179) = -0.83$, $p = .41$.

To determine whether fusion with religion during Wave 1 predicted hostility during Wave 2 above and beyond the competing variables of conservatism and RF, we entered the two variables and the two types of fusion at Wave 1, along with hostility at Wave 1 and demographics, in a regression model predicting hostility at Wave 2. Fusion with religion predicted hostility at Wave 2, $b = .16$, $t(177) = 2.72$, $p = .007$, but neither fusion with country, RF, nor conservatism did so ($p > .35$). Furthermore, we ran similar regressions utilizing each of the three conservatism single items in place of the composite one. None of these regressions altered the significance of any of the variables in model. Neither the economic conservatism item, nor the social one, were significant ($p > .35$). Although the security conservatism item was significant, $b = .08$, $t(177) = 2.32$, $p = .02$, including it in the model did not alter the significance of the other predictors.

Finally, we sought to test whether the relationship between fusion with religion and out-group hostility was stronger during higher threat in Wave 2 as compared to Wave 1. We conducted a hierarchical linear model (HLM) to investigate whether threat level (dummy coded, before vs. during the intifada) interacted with religious fusion while controlling for age, sex, and SES. The Threat $\times$ Religious Fusion interaction was significant, $b = .10$, $t(159) = 2.46$, $p = .02$. This interaction reflected a tendency for threat to increase hostility more among strongly fused as compared to weakly fused participants. Note, however, that even during the relative calm associated with Wave 1, the link between fusion with religion and hostility emerged, with stronger fusion predicting more hostility, $b = .29$, $t(161) = 4.92$, $p < .001$.

As the security conservatism item was significant in the above regressions, we created an additional HLM model that included it in an interaction term with threat (this parallels fusion with religion, which was also entered as an interaction term). The Security Conservatism $\times$ Threat interaction was nonsignificant ($p = .14$), while the fusion with Religion $\times$ Threat interaction remained significant ($p = .004$).

Discussion

In intractable conflicts such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, identity clearly matters (Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). The question is how. Our findings suggest that in Israel, strong alignment with religion caused hostility toward Palestinians. Specifically, fusion with religion, rather than nation, fostered endorsement of retaliation against Palestinians in response to intensified terrorist attacks. Fusion with religion was not only associated with endorsement of retaliation toward Palestinians before the 2015 Intifada began, it also predicted an increase in retaliation after the Intifada began. Moreover, fusion with religion predicted these outcomes above and beyond fusion with nation, conservatism, and RF.

At first blush, our evidence that fusion with religion predicted endorsement of retaliation even during a period of relative calm (Wave 1) may seem to challenge the assumption that expressions of out-group hate *require* out-group threat (Brewer, 1999). Note, however, that even during Wave 1, there were *some* Palestinian attacks on Israelis. Moreover, the long history of conflict in this region surely fosters the perception of threat even in the absence of recent attacks. This likely explains why fusion predicted hostility even during a period of relative calm.

Future research should investigate further the mechanisms underlying our findings. We hypothesized that in Israel, where religious rituals occur in the context of family gatherings, religion leverages familial ties to produce strong reactivity to threat. We did not test this causal pathway directly, however. Note that it is not just the linkage of religious fusion to familial ties that makes it so emotionally potent. Rather, the key to the power of religious ritual is the systematic instillation of religious ideology. These ritualistic practices persuade members to view their fellow group members as similarly minded members of the same "family" who must protect and remain loyal to other members of the family. It is no wonder, then, that fusion with Judaism encouraged our participants to endorse harsh retaliation against their Palestinian attackers. This may also explain why the instillation of ideologies associated with Israel, which is far less likely to occur in the context of family rituals, leads to a somewhat weaker form of fusion.

Insofar as religion plays an even more prominent role in other Middle East countries than it does in Israel, it may be especially influential in those countries. Moreover, as in Israel, fusion with religion may out-predict fusion with country, especially if it is interwoven with family ties and ritual practices. Although ideology contributes to the potency of fusion with religion, we suspect that allegiances based on ideology alone will pack less psychological punch than allegiances grounded in familial ties and ritual (e.g., Buhrmester et al., 2014; Sageman, 2004; Swann, Buhrmester, et al., 2014). Note, for example, that many of the most potent prescriptions of the Torah, Koran, and Bible are designed to foster harmonious intragroup relations. Fusion with religion may thus motivate retaliatory behaviors because it involves protecting a community of kindred souls as well as an abstract cause.

Summary and Implications

Previous research on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict indicates that out-group acceptance of the in-group's narrative shows promise as a means of resolving the conflict (Salomon, 2004). Our findings provide insight into what components of in-group identity are important to the Israeli narrative. Specifically, our findings demonstrate that religion is a key

component of the Israeli narrative, more important even than the nation state of Israel. This suggests that future concessions will be maximally effective if they acknowledge not just the right of Israel (and Palestine) to exist but also that this right is grounded in a religious history dating back to ancient texts.

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Note

1. Both pilot studies examined whether fusion or identification with Israel predicted hostility toward Palestinians. Study 1 looked only at aid cessation utilizing a logistic regression, while study 2 looked at aid cessation and transferring Palestinians out of Gaza utilizing an ordinary least squares regression. In both studies fusion, $b = .89$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 3.12$, $p = .02$; $t(200) = 3.12$, $b = .40$, $p = .002$, predicted the outcome above and beyond identification, $b = .08$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = .05$, $p = .83$; $t(200) = 1.29$, $b = 3.96$, $p = .20$.

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