



SACRED VALUES

AUTHOR

Nicholas Taylor
Senior Principal Analyst,
Exploration Division
Defence Science and
Technology Laboratory



The Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research is the British Army's think tank and tasked with enhancing the conceptual component of its fighting power. The views expressed in this *In Depth Briefing* are those of the author, and not of the CHACR, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, Ministry of Defence or the British Army. The aim of the briefing is to provide a neutral platform for external researchers and experts to offer their views on critical issues. This document cannot be reproduced or used in part or whole without the permission of the CHACR.
www.chacr.org.uk

AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR DETERRENCE AND INFLUENCE PLANNING

THIS paper is the product of ongoing research on the subject of strategic culture and, specifically, understanding the values of other groups. It draws on a range of behavioural and decision-making research, and seeks to apply the findings in a defence, foreign and security policy context. Specifically, how might we better understand other groups' sacred or non-negotiable values, in order to avoid inadvertent escalation?

DEFINITION: WHAT ARE SACRED VALUES?

Human decision-making is generally assumed to involve cost-benefit calculations which help the decision-maker achieve

their goals. In general, if the costs outweigh the benefits, most people will adjust or even abandon their goals. This is known as 'instrumental' decision-making.¹ Sacred values (also referred to as 'protected values') differ from instrumental values by incorporating moral (including

¹Ginges, Atran, Medin and Shikaki (2007), 'Sacred Bounds on Rational Resolution of Violent Political Conflict', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104:7357-60.

²Atran, Axelrod and Davis (2007), 'Sacred barriers to Conflict Resolution', *Science* 317:1039-40.

³Ibid.

⁴Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*, (2010: Penguin Books, London), p. 38.

⁵Baron & Spranca, 'Protected Values', *Organizational Behavioral and Human Decision Processes*, 70:1-16 (1997).

religious) beliefs. These beliefs drive decisions and actions in ways that are not associated with the likelihood of the decision-maker achieving their goals.²

People who believe that their sacred or protected values are absolute or inviolable can be found in every part of the world.³ Unlike instrumental values, sacred values include what anthropologist Scott Atran calls 'inscrutable propositions that are immune to logic or empirical evidence'.⁴ Consequently, one of the defining properties of sacred values is the reluctance or even the refusal of their holder to negotiate or trade them.⁵

Examples of sacred values include the sacred status of cows in

Hindu culture or Jerusalem in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. As these examples show, sacred values often have their basis in religion, but secular values such as belief in fairness, reciprocity or collective identity might also be considered sacred values.

HOW TO IDENTIFY SACRED VALUES

Baron and Spranca propose that the defining property of sacred values is absoluteness. They also propose a number of other properties that are present in most cases.⁶

Absoluteness: people will resist trading off sacred values for any form of compensation; in this sense, their sacred values are absolute. People are likely to refuse to discuss or enter into negotiations involving sacred values.

Quantity insensitivity: the quantity of any consequence (of a decision or action) is irrelevant to holders of sacred values; the sacred value applies to the act itself, not the result. This can also apply to the likelihood of a consequence occurring: holders of sacred values will not accept any likelihood of a particular event occurring, no matter how slim.

Agent relativity: sacred values are agent-relative (rather than

“IN CONFLICTS WHERE ONE OF THE PARTIES INVOLVED HOLDS SACRED VALUES, STANDARD APPROACHES TO NEGOTIATIONS ARE HIGHLY LIKELY TO BACKFIRE. MATERIAL OFFERS AND OTHER INCENTIVES WILL BE INTERPRETED AS MORALLY TABOO AND INSULTING.”

agent-general); this means that the participation of the decision-maker involved is important, rather than what the actual consequences of the decision may be.

Moral obligation: actions required by sacred values are seen as moral obligations; they are not personal preferences or conventions, but are seen as compulsory behaviours.

Denial of trade-offs: holders of sacred values generally tend to deny even the existence of trade-offs with their sacred values.

Anger: perhaps crucially, people may become angry at the very thought of any violation of their sacred values; this is because, from their perspective, it would be a moral violation.

THE LINK WITH IDENTITY

Although sacred values are often derived from religious beliefs, Atran proposes that they can emerge around issues with relatively little historical background and significance

when they become bound up with conflicts over group identity.⁷ Dehghani et al concur; their research into Iran’s nuclear programme concluded that, despite the programme being a relatively recent development, it is treated as sacred by some Iranians, leading to a greater disapproval of deals which involve monetary incentives to end the programme.⁸ From this, it might be concluded that relatively recent sovereignty-related issues can become bound up with issues of collective identity and become sacred, or protected, values.⁹

GENERAL IMPLICATIONS

As Ginges et al highlight, if material incentives are offered to someone in return for them compromising their sacred values, the likelihood of violent opposition often increases.¹⁰ Atran’s research also suggests that people will reject any type of material compensation for dropping their commitment to the sacred values and defend such values, regardless of the costs.¹¹ Some people and groups are willing to endure very high costs

and for long periods of time.¹²

It is this absolutist view that runs directly counter to economic theories of rational choice and political science theories of rational play in negotiations. Consequently, in conflicts where one of the parties involved holds sacred values, standard approaches to negotiations are highly likely to backfire. Material offers and other incentives will be interpreted as morally taboo and insulting.¹³

For holders of sacred values, even contemplating proposals to exchange sacred values for secular ones is unacceptable. As Tetlock, Lerner and Peterson describe, that very idea is something to be condemned if one is the observer and

⁶Ibid.

⁷Atran, *op cit*.

⁸Dehghani, Iliev, Sachdeva, Atran, Ginges and Medin, ‘Emerging sacred values: Iran’s nuclear program’, *Judgement and Decision Making*, Vol. 4, No. 7, December 2009, pp. 930-933.

⁹ibid.

¹⁰Ginges, Atran, Medin and Shikaki, *op cit*.

¹¹Atran, *op cit*.

¹²Varshney, ‘Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Rationality’, *Perspectives on Politics* Vol. 1 No. 1 (March 2003).

¹³Atran, *op cit*.

Picture: Buno Aguirre/unsplash



something to be concealed if one is the decision-maker.¹⁴ Indeed, the mere thought of trading off sacred values against secular values such as money is perceived as morally outrageous and, in effect, taboo.¹⁵

WAYS TO ENGAGE WITH HOLDERS OF SACRED VALUES

Improving understanding of other groups' sacred values may help to resolve, and even avoid, conflict. Atran proposes a number of ways in which sacred values might be understood and, subsequently, how our engagement with others may be adjusted accordingly.¹⁶

Exploit the ambiguity of 'sacred'. People often apply what might be perceived to be the 'same' sacred values in different ways, which can facilitate the creative use of ambiguity. An example is different views of notions of 'equality', which many consider a core value.

Shift the context. This can result in groups prioritising one sacred value over another in one context but reversing priorities in a different situation. For example, Hamas leaders sometimes appeal to a 'common understanding of humanity as being greater than Islamist calls for martyrdom', but on

“THE US LOSING MATCH AFTER MATCH OF TABLE TENNIS TO CHINA IN THE ‘PING PONG DIPLOMACY’ OF 1971 PROVIDED SOMETHING OF GREAT SYMBOLIC VALUE TO CHINA, WHERE TABLE TENNIS IS A SPORT OF NATIONAL PRESTIGE, AT LITTLE COST TO THE US.”

other occasions their priorities are reversed.¹⁷

Provisionally prioritise values. The pragmatic prioritisation of one sacred value over another – usually to achieve specific aims – however provisional to begin with, may lead to a more permanent realignment of those values.

Refine or update sacred values to exclude outmoded claims. Some of the claims that underpin sacred values may be patently false. If groups that hold such values are able to renounce such claims, this may allow them to reframe and refine some of those values.

Use one side's sacred values to amplify the importance of concessions by the other side. A relatively low-cost way to show respect for another group's sacred values is to find things that mean much to them but little to one's own side. The

US losing match after match of table tennis to China in the 'ping pong diplomacy' of 1971 provided something of great symbolic value to China, where table tennis is a sport of national prestige, at little cost to the US.¹⁸

The art of the apology. In international politics, apologies may not be so much deal-makers, but more of a means of facilitating political compromise. A symbolic gesture such as an apology can redefine the scope and limits of subsequent negotiations and possible material transactions. Nevertheless, there are some important considerations to bear in mind when considering making such an apology.

Without the acceptance of responsibility, apologies do not work. Apologies can provide openings only if consistent actions follow.

An apology should be consistent with one's own core values while simultaneously demonstrating sensitivity to the values of others.

Japan's repeated apologies for atrocities committed in World War II were dismissed by China when the Japanese prime minister visited a shrine that honours Japan's war dead, including convicted war criminals.

A qualified apology can be worse than none at all. For example, after the US administration apologised for the abuse of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld claimed that the mistreatment was not the failure of US policy, but of a few wayward soldiers. This resulted in angry dismissal of the apology by many in the Arab and Muslim world.¹⁹

IMPLICATIONS FOR DETERRENCE AND INFLUENCE PLANNING

While the academic research into sacred values does not,

¹⁴Tetlock, Lerner & Peterson, 'Revising the Value Pluralism Model: Incorporating Social Content and Context Postulates', in Seligman, Olson & Zanna (eds.), *The Psychology of Values: The Ontario Symposium, Volume 8* (Erlbaum: Hillsdale, NJ, 1996), pp. 25-51.

¹⁵Tetlock, 'Thinking the Unthinkable: Sacred Values and Taboo Cognitions', *Trends in Cognitive Science*, 7:320-24 (2003).

¹⁶This section greatly informed by Atran's *Talking to the Enemy*.

¹⁷*Ibid*, p. 385.

¹⁸*Ibid*, p. 388.

¹⁹*Ibid*, p. 392.



on the whole, directly address deterrence and influence issues, there are clear implications. Deterrence often relies on the threat of imposing costs on an actor, widely known as deterrence by punishment. In the context of armed conflict, this frequently refers to the destruction of, or other form of attack on, specific items of property and/or territory.

This review has identified that things may be considered sacred that are abstract or ideational, for example, the concepts of equality or freedom; or physical, such as the status of Jerusalem to Jews or Mecca to Muslims. The status of any of these things is, to the holder of such a sacred value, non-negotiable. As Atran highlights ‘standard business-style negotiations in such... conflicts will only backfire.’²⁰ Therefore, in a deterrence context, it can be induced that any threat to such a sacred value will not achieve the desired effect; in fact, multiple pieces of research conclude that such threats can result in anger and violence.²¹ Unintended escalation could quite likely result.

Additionally, many deterrence

and coercion strategies seek to achieve the desired objective by imposing unacceptable costs on an adversary; however, as Varshney states, some people and groups are willing to endure very high costs and for long periods of time to defend their sacred values.²² In such a situation, it may be very difficult, if not impossible, to impose sufficient costs on an adversary to make them change their behaviour.

The consequences for deterrence and influence planning are clear. If the deterrence objective concerns an adversary’s strategic value(s); or if a deterrence strategy involves threatening any beliefs or physical objects that

the adversary holds as sacred, then the strategy is likely to fail. Indeed, it is quite possible that such deterrence activities will result in unintended escalation.

This emphasises the value of understanding an adversary’s strategic culture and, crucially, any sacred or protected values the group may hold. If this can be achieved and it is established that an adversary holds such sacred values, then alternative approaches and engagement strategies may produce more favourable outcomes. These may include:

- If deterrence is still the preferred approach, a different

emphasis may be required, focusing more on deterrence by denial, de-legitimation and counter-narrative, or any other suitable means.

- Consideration of other strategies such as containment and/or reassurance, if applicable.

- Alternative approaches to conflict resolution, which should involve attempts to identify suitable ‘off-ramps’ – outcomes which are acceptable to all parties. These are highly likely to involve what Atran refers to as ‘symbolic concessions’.

Research into the utility and applicability of strategic culture is ongoing, with the aim of providing timely and useful insights in a structures manner, that can improve defence and security decision-making.

The author welcomes comment and feedback.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 377.

²¹ Baron & Spranca, *op cit*; Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*; Ginges, Atran, Medin & Shikaki, *op cit*.

²² Varshney, *op cit*.

