



HAL
open science

How Words Could End a War

Scott Atran, Jeremy Ginges

► **To cite this version:**

Scott Atran, Jeremy Ginges. How Words Could End a War. New York Times and International Herald Tribune, 2009, pp.WK12. ijn_00505432

HAL Id: ijn_00505432

https://hal.science/ijn_00505432

Submitted on 23 Jul 2010

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Welcome to TimesPeople
Get Started

TimesPeople recommended: **Addicted to Bush**

10:20 AM

Recommend

HOME PAGE TODAY'S PAPER VIDEO MOST POPULAR TIMES TOPICS

Try Times Reader 2.0 | Log In | Register Now

The New York Times

Opinion

Search All NYTimes.com

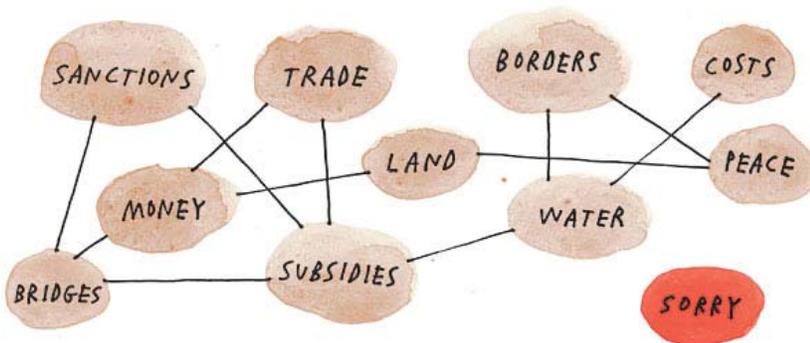
ING DIRECT
Member FDIC

WORLD U.S. N.Y. / REGION BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY SCIENCE HEALTH SPORTS OPINION ARTS STYLE TRAVEL JOBS REAL ESTATE AUTOS

EDITORIALS COLUMNISTS CONTRIBUTORS LETTERS THE PUBLIC EDITOR

OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

How Words Could End a War



Tucker Nichols

By SCOTT ATRAN and JEREMY GINGES
Published: January 24, 2009

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.

FACEBOOK

TWITTER

RECOMMEND

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL OR SAVE THIS

PRINT

SHARE

CAREY MULLIGAN

More Articles in Opinion »

Advertise on NYTimes.com

MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED VIEWED

1. Shoppers on a 'Diet' Tame the Urge to Buy
2. The Web Means the End of Forgetting
3. The New Dating Tools: A Card and a Wink
4. The Yoga Mogul
5. Raising the Bar on Pet Décor
6. Who Lives There: In a Crumbling Estate, Creativity and History Meet
7. Nicholas D. Kristof: Don't Write Off Men Just Yet
8. Hope Against Hepatitis C
9. New Guidelines Seek to Reduce Repeat Caesareans
10. Well: Attention Disorders Can Take a Toll on Marriage

Go to Complete List »



Cheaper hybrid rentals

ALSO IN BUSINESS »
Baseball players fight child obesity
Follow Economix on Twitter

nytimes.com

BUSINESS

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.

ADVERTISEMENTS



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.

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM

For example, a typical set of trade-offs offered to a Palestinian might begin with this premise: Suppose the United Nations 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

Indeed, across the political spectrum, 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 to trade-offs for peace?

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.

As for sweetening the pot, in general the greater the monetary incentive involved in the deal, the greater the disgust from respondents. Israelis and Palestinians alike often reacted as though we had asked them to sell their children. This strongly implies that using the standard approaches of “business-like 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 concrete progress on material and quality-of-life matters (electricity, water, agriculture, the economy and so on) 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." His response suggested that progress on sacred values might open the way for negotiations on material issues, rather than the reverse.

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 in the region. 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.

Scott Atran, an anthropologist at the National Center for Scientific Research in Paris, John Jay College and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, is the author of the forthcoming "Talking to the Enemy." Jeremy Ginges is a professor of psychology at the New School for Social Research.

[Recommend](#)

A version of this article appeared in print on January 25, 2009, on page WK12 of the New York edition.

[More Articles in Opinion »](#)

Past Coverage

[Taliban Fill NATO's Big Gaps in Afghan South \(January 22, 2009\)](#)
[ISRAEL DEEPENS GAZA INCURSION AS TOLL MOUNTS \(January 6, 2009\)](#)
[Israeli Attack Splits Gaza; Truce Calls Are Rebuffed: Death Toll Passes 500 -- City Is Surrounded \(January 5, 2009\)](#)
[Amid a Buildup of Its Forces, Israel Ponders a Cease-Fire \(December 31, 2008\)](#)

Related Searches

[Armament, Defense and Military Forces](#)
[Terrorism](#)
[Israel](#)
[West Bank](#)

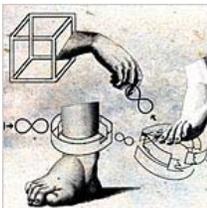
[Get E-Mail Alerts](#)
[Get E-Mail Alerts](#)
[Get E-Mail Alerts](#)
[Get E-Mail Alerts](#)

[U.S. »](#)



[Death Does Not Deter Jellyfish Sting](#)

[OPINION »](#)



[The Stone: The Maze of Free Will](#)

[ARTS »](#)



[Manhattan's Rooftop Bars: Heaven's Gates](#)

[N.Y. / REGION »](#)



[No Matter How You Cut It, a July That's Too Hot](#)

[OPINION »](#)

Op-Ed: Raising Doctors to Treat Children

Despite an abundance of pediatricians in the United States, there is a shortage of subspecialists, writes Dennis Rosen.

[WORLD »](#)



[A Museum Display of Galileo Has a Saintly Feel](#)

[Home](#) | [World](#) | [U.S.](#) | [N.Y./Region](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Health](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts](#) | [Style](#) | [Travel](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Automobiles](#) | [Back to Top](#)

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
