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Vulnerability and Vigilance: Threat Awareness and Perceived Adversary Intent Moderate the Impact of Mortality Salience on Intergroup Violence

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Three studies examined whether perceived adversary intent and personal vulnerability moderate the effects of mortality salience (MS) on violent solutions to conflict. In Study 1, following MS, Israeli participants read a description of de-escalating or escalating Iranian rhetoric. In Study 2, following MS, Israeli participants read about tensions with Iran and reflected on the personal ramifications of the conflict or on the content of the passage. In Study 3, Israeli participants with direct war exposure were compared to participants with no war exposure, and following MS, read a description of escalating or de-escalating Hezbollah rhetoric. Results revealed that MS increased support of violence under escalating conditions and low perceived vulnerability. However, for persons with direct war exposure, MS induced support of violence contingent on adversary rhetoric. Thus, direct experience with war leads to a more nuanced contingent response to existential threat not present among those without direct war experience.

Keywords: terror management; violence; conflict; perceived vulnerability

The ongoing violent conflict in the Middle-East is a global problem with far-reaching political, economic, environmental, and social implications. Although the focus of much scholarship examining this conflict has been on tangible, concrete factors that contribute to violent escalation, such as issues surrounding land, water, oil, occupation, and terrorism (e.g., Maoz, Yaniv, & Ivry, 2007), recent research has shown that powerful psychological forces also play a role in fueling this conflict. War and terrorism increase the accessibility of the basic existential fears that people attempt to keep out of awareness. For example, Landau et al. (2004) showed that subliminal exposure to stimuli related to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States increased the accessibility of death-related thoughts among Americans, and Gillespie and Jessop (2007) demonstrated that newspaper accounts of terrorist attacks in either the United States or the United Kingdom increased the accessibility of death-related thoughts among British persons. Research has also shown that reminders of death increase support of

War is as much a punishment to the punisher as it is to the sufferer.

Thomas Jefferson

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violent solutions to conflict among Israelis, Iranians, and Americans (e.g., Hirschberger & Ein-Dor, 2006; Pyszczynski et al., 2006). Although a great deal of research has documented the many ways in which death-related fears increase prejudice, intergroup, hostility, aggression, and support of war (for a review, see Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003), terror management theory (TMT; e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997) does not view such antagonistic reactions as inevitable responses to existential threat. The research reported here examined the role of two contextual factors, rhetoric from adversary leaders and perceived personal threat of war-related violence, on the way reminders of death influence support of military violence.

**TMT**

According to TMT (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1997; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2001), humans are caught in an intolerable paradox—they cherish life but are aware of the fact that life is transient and temporary. The inability to escape this destined fate could render humans helpless and consumed with terror. Because there is no real solution to the problem of death itself, humans have devised elaborate symbolic defense mechanisms that remove thoughts of death from conscious awareness. This denial of death, according to Becker (1973), is an ongoing dynamic process that shields the individual from existential terror and provides psychological equanimity most of the time. Based on these ideas, TMT posits that three psychological structures function as primary defense mechanisms against the anxiety associated with death awareness: cultural worldview, self-esteem (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1997; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999), and close interpersonal relationships (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003). Accordingly, embracing the cultural worldview, possessing high self-esteem, or feeling secure in a close relationship is associated with lower levels of death-thought accessibility and less defensive reactions (for a recent review, see Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008).

Numerous studies have supported the basic tenets of TMT and have demonstrated that individuals primed with death react more favorably to those who uphold cultural values and more negatively to those who violate them (e.g., Florian & Mikulincer, 1997; Greenberg, Simon, Porteus, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1995; Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002; McGregor et al., 1998). Cultural worldviews are symbolic representations of reality that are specific to a given culture and may be threatened by different worldviews that imply the possibility that one's own worldview is incorrect. For this reason, TMT has suggested that encounters with others with different worldviews may be threatening and thus lead to distancing, derogation, and even aggression against the other. Because of the terror management function that cultural worldviews are posited to serve, such reactions are expected to be especially strong when death is salient. Research has consistently shown that when primed with death, people exhibit negative reactions toward members of outgroups. For example, studies have shown that when primed with death, Christian participants rated Christian targets more positively and Jewish targets more negatively (Greenberg et al., 1990), American participants reacted more aggressively to a person who criticized their political views (McGregor et al., 1998), and White Americans expressed more sympathy toward a White racist (Greenberg, Schimel, Martens, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2001).

**Terror Management and Ethnopolitical Conflict**

In the aftermath of September 11th, a growing body of terror management research has focused on terrorism, global conflict, and the psychological processes that steer international tensions toward violent solutions (for a review, see Pyszczynski, Rothschild, & Abdollahi, 2008). Such studies have shown that mortality salience (MS): (a) increased political support of charismatic leaders who emphasize the superiority of the ingroup (F. Cohen, Solomon, Maxfield, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2004), (b) increased support of President Bush and his military policies in Iraq (Landau et al., 2004), (c) led conservative Americans to support more extreme military tactics in fighting terrorism (Pyszczynski et al., 2006), (d) led right-wing Israelis to support violent resistance against policies that threaten their worldview (Hirschberger & Ein-Dor, 2006), and (e) led Iranians to increase support of suicide bombing as an appropriate tactic to fight American imperialism (Pyszczynski et al., 2006). These studies support the contention that the need to manage existential concerns often increases support of violent solutions to ethnopolitical conflict.

Fortunately, TMT does not view hostility and violence as an inevitable response to existential threat, even in times of war and conflict. Although the theory posits that threats to one's worldview, self-esteem, and relationships often do lead to hostility, and TMT posits that such reactions are especially strong when the problem of death is salient, the logic of TMT is that thoughts of death lead people to gravitate toward whatever behavior or attitude is most associated with subjective feelings of security and safety (cf. Pyszczynski et al., 2006). Thus, understanding the impact of existential fear on preferred responses to ethnopolitical conflict requires a consideration of (a) a wide range of contextual variables that determine the extent of threat posed by the other side and (b) which
policies from one’s own side are expected to provide the greatest sense of safety and security within the situation one is currently facing.

We believe it is especially important to study these processes and contextual factors within real intergroup conflicts involving actual threat to life because the presence of these consequences may change the responses that people gravitate toward to quell their existential fears. As T. R. Cohen and Insko (2008) point out, there is an important difference between the hypothetical scenarios employed in much research on intergroup conflict and the real-life dilemmas facing participants in regions afflicted with war and terrorist violence. When faced with hypothetical scenarios, participants may feel free to express aggression against a threatening or disliked outgroup because there are either no future consequences for actions, or if there are any, participants are not aware of them. However, in the case of intractable, ongoing conflict, as currently faces the Middle East, the likelihood of future interactions between combating parties is virtually certain.

It is notable that most terror management research has conceptualized existential threat as an abstract, inevitable death against which one defends with symbolic social constructs such as the cultural worldview. One of the unique aspects of the present research is that existential threat is conceptualized as containing both a threat to symbolic constructs, and a threat to actual physical safety. To emphasize the actual level of threat participants are likely to perceive from the other side of the conflict, we examined the individual and combined effects of two factors that pertain not only to symbolic levels of threat but also to actual, physical threat: rhetoric from the leaders of the other side of the conflict and perceived personal vulnerability to conflict-related violence.

**STUDY 1**

Study 1 was designed to test the hypothesis that perceived adversary intent would moderate the relation between MS and support of violent solutions to ethnopolitical conflict. This study focused on the growing tensions between Iran and Israel, with the former making frequent threats to destroy the State of Israel while allegedly developing nuclear capabilities. On the other hand, Iranian leaders have also occasionally made conciliatory remarks to signal the possibility of peaceful coexistence of the two nations (e.g., Iranian Vice President Rahim-Mashaei’s peaceful comments; D. Cohen, 2008). We chose to focus on Israeli reactions to the conflict-escalating and de-escalating rhetoric of Iranian leaders because Iran is perceived among most Israelis as posing the greatest threat to their country’s existence (Ben-Meir & Shaked, 2007). TMT suggests that responses to reminders of death depend on the individual’s perception of the extent of threat posed by the other. This implies that conflict-escalating rhetoric from Iran should steer responses to existential threat in the direction of increased support of military violence. On the other hand, conflict-de-escalating rhetoric from Iranian leaders was predicted to steer responses to death reminders in a more peaceful direction. Study 1 took place between September 2005 and January 2006.

**Method**

**Participants.** Eighty undergraduate students from Bar-Ilan University (37 men, 43 women) ranging in age from 18 to 40 (Mdn = 24) participated in the study for course credit.

**Materials and procedure.** Experimental sessions were run in groups of 10-15 participants, with experimental conditions randomly assigned within each group such that in each group participants were assigned to all experimental conditions. A research assistant presented the research as a study of personality, memory, and political attitudes, and participants received a packet of questionnaires that they were asked to complete at their own pace. The first questionnaire was a bogus personality inventory intended to disguise the goal of the study.

Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. In the MS condition (N = 39) participants answered the following open-ended questions: “What do you think happens to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead?” and “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you.” In the pain salience condition (N = 41) participants received the same open-ended questions with all references to death replaced with “severe physical pain.” This procedure has been successfully used in numerous TMT studies (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1990). Following the MS induction, all participants completed a word search puzzle that was included as a distractor because previous studies have shown that MS effects occur after people have been distracted from thoughts of their own death (e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994).

After completing this procedure, participants were randomly assigned to one of two hypothetical scenarios on the crisis between the West (with an emphasis on Israel) and Iran. The scenarios were formatted as newspaper articles to increase their credibility, were based on actual developments in the region, and were inspired by the content of speeches made by Iranian officials in the past few years. In the escalation condition participants read the following paragraph:
The Iranian leadership has been escalating their rhetoric on the need to destroy Israel, and the world is showing increasing concern about the development of the Iranian nuclear program. According to experts on the matter, Iran will be able to produce nuclear weapons within one to three years. Moreover, the Iranian government adamantly refuses to consider any of the proposals of the international community, and will not allow any inspections of its nuclear facilities.

In the de-escalation condition participants read the following paragraph:

The Iranian leadership has changed its tone and has recently declared that Israel will be able to exist in the region if it recognizes the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, and respects the culture and values of the Muslim majority in the region. Moreover, Iran has started to cooperate with the UN agency for nuclear energy and it is considering several proposals that may satisfy international concerns on weapons development, including the presence of UN inspectors.

Following these scenarios participants completed an 11-item questionnaire on how Israel should respond to Iran, answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Six of the items represented possible aggressive responses toward Iran (e.g., “Israel should launch an attack against Iran’s nuclear installations”; “Israel should launch a pre-emptive nuclear attack against Iran”), and five of the items (reverse scored) represented diplomatic efforts to deal with the crisis (e.g., “The only solution to the crisis with Iran is a diplomatic solution”; “Israel should attempt to establish a covert dialogue with the Iranian leadership”). A total aggression toward Iran score was computed by averaging all 11 items (Cronbach’s alpha = .81). Higher scores indicated greater support of a violent response toward Iran. Participants then completed a short demographic sheet and were thanked and debriefed.

Results and Discussion

To examine the impact of MS (death, pain) and Iranian rhetoric (escalation, de-escalation) on Israeli participants’ support of a violent response toward Iran, a 2 × 2 ANOVA was conducted. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of rhetoric, $F(1, 76) = 8.33, p < .01$, such that participants indicated greater support of a violent response in the escalation scenario ($M = 4.27$, $SD = .79$) than in the de-escalation scenario ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.15$). This main effect was moderated by a significant MS × Rhetoric interaction, $F(1, 76) = 15.31, p < .001$. Tests for simple main effects were conducted to examine the source of this significant interaction and revealed that in the escalation condition, MS led to greater support of violence toward Iran compared to the control condition, $F(1, 76) = 10.25, p < .01$. However, in the de-escalation condition, MS had the opposite effect and led to lower support of violence compared to the control condition, $F(1, 76) = 5.44, p < .05$ (see Figure 1).

The results of Study 1 support our hypothesis and indicate that when death is salient and the intent of the enemy is perceived as extremely hostile, support of extreme violence increases significantly. However, when the rhetoric of enemy leaders provides a hint that conflict is not imminent and unavoidable, primes of death have the opposite effect and lead to less support of pre-emptive violence.

These findings provide a clear demonstration that primes of death do not necessarily lead to increased support of aggression against an outgroup with which one has an ongoing conflict and that the climate of the conflict may dramatically change the direction by which death primes influence political attitudes. This is consistent with the previous findings of Greenberg, Simon, and Pyszczynski (1992), which showed that priming tolerance eliminated the effect of MS on increased negativity toward a person from one’s own country who criticized one’s political views, and adds to the growing literature documenting the importance of contextual factors in determining responses to death-related threats.

STUDY 2

Study 2 continues this direction and examines whether perceived personal vulnerability to the consequences of violent conflict also affects the way existential threat influences support of violent solutions to an ongoing conflict. A focus on the likely personal consequences of an ongoing conflict may change the attractiveness of the possible responses to that conflict. In particular, a focus on personal consequences might lead to a more cautious, less violent response. Although the possible effect of a focus on personal consequences on responses to MS has not yet been examined, research on self-esteem defenses
is consistent with the possibility that such a focus might have a moderating effect. For example, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Paisley (1984) demonstrated that although anticipating an upcoming future performance increased self-handicapping, the presence of an attractive incentive for high performance eliminated the tendency to self-handicap. Extrapolating this finding to the present context suggests that a focus on possible personal consequences of an escalation of an ongoing conflict might direct people's responses to reminders of death toward more pragmatic and peaceful solutions.

Study 2 was designed to test this hypothesis. After a manipulation of MS, Israeli participants read an article about the escalating conflict between Israel and Iran. Half of the participants were instructed to reflect on the likely personal consequences of this situation for themselves, their families, and loved ones, whereas control participants were simply instructed to reflect on the article with no specific directions. Study 2 took place between February and June 2007

Participants. Three hundred and eight undergraduate students from Bar-Ilan University (82 men, 196 women, 30 who did not report their gender) participated in the study for course credit. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 52 (Mdn = 24).

Materials and procedure. Experimental sessions were run in groups of 5-15 participants with experimental conditions randomly assigned within each group. The experimenter presented the research as a study of personality and social and political attitudes, and participants received a packet of questionnaires that they were asked to complete at their own pace. The first questionnaire was a bogus personality inventory intended to disguise the goal of the study.

Next, participants were randomly assigned to either the MS condition (N = 154) or pain salience control condition (N = 154) as in Study 1. Following the distractor puzzle used in Study 1, all of the participants read an essay formatted to look like a newspaper article that described in a factual manner the tensions between Iran and the West. The article described the Iranian nuclear project, the sanctions against Iran posed by the West, the current failure to find a diplomatic solution to this crisis, and the possibility of a violent outbreak. In the high personal vulnerability condition, participants read the article followed by the instruction: “Try to think about the repercussions this situation might have on you and on your loved ones when you answer the following questions.” In the low personal vulnerability condition, participants were given instructions to reflect on the article they had just read before answering the questions. After reading the articles, all participants completed the same 11-item scale on support of extreme violence against Iran used in Study 1 (Cronbach’s alpha = .78). They then completed a demographic sheet and were thanked and debriefed.

Results and Discussion

To examine the influence of MS and personal vulnerability on support of violence against Iran, a 2 × 2 ANOVA was conducted with MS (death, pain) and personal vulnerability (high, low) as the independent variables and support of extreme violence against Iran as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of personal vulnerability, F(1, 304) = 7.14, p < .01, indicating that participants in the high personal vulnerability condition (M = 3.88, SD = 1.08) expressed less support of extreme violence than participants in the low personal vulnerability condition (M = 4.2, SD = .95). This main effect was moderated by the expected MS × Personal Vulnerability interaction, F(1, 304) = 8.76, p < .01.

Tests for simple main effects revealed that when personal vulnerability was low, primes of death increased support of extreme violence compared to the control condition, F(1, 304) = 4.75, p < .05. However, when personal vulnerability was high, an opposite pattern was found, such that in the MS condition support of violence was lower compared to the control condition, F(1, 304) = 4.02, p < .05 (see Figure 2).

These results provide additional evidence for the role that contextual factors play in moderating responses to reminders of death on support of violent solutions to international conflicts. The findings also show that the effect of MS on violent inclinations depends on participants’ focus on their personal vulnerability in the ongoing conflict. The results of Studies 1 and 2 indicate that low levels of personal vulnerability and conflict-escalating scenarios that seem to provide few alternatives to violent confrontation foster support of extreme violence when death is salient, in this case, military action that includes a preemptive nuclear attack. However, when personal vulnerability is high or when enemy rhetoric...
suggests hope for a peaceful resolution—providing alternative routes for managing the conflict—primes of death elicit less support of extreme violence.

The personal vulnerability manipulation used in Study 2 required participants to reflect on the personal ramifications the conflict may have on them and their loved ones. We consider this approach a reasonable starting point for investigating the concept of personal vulnerability; however, one should note that this manipulation may conjure up other issues such as self-relevance or deeper thoughts about death. In Study 3 we conceptualized personal vulnerability in a more ecologically valid manner to examine whether convergent operationalizations would support the validity of the personal vulnerability construct.

STUDY 3

Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated the role of personal vulnerability and escalating or de-escalating rhetoric as moderators of the link between death concerns and support of ethnopolitical violence. Study 3 examined the interaction between these two factors in the same study. Specifically, we were interested in the impact of personal vulnerability on the way MS influences responses to adversary rhetoric. Although it may be relatively easy to respond to MS with a hawkish proviolence stance, a sense that one is likely to be personally involved in the consequent violence may lead to more moderate responses. As many observers have noted (e.g., Van Deerlin, 2002), it is often (though certainly not always) those who are personally removed from direct personal threat and contact with violence who are most supportive of violent solutions to intergroup conflicts (i.e., “chickenhawks”). Given that Study 2 demonstrated that perceptions of personal vulnerability led to more peaceful responses to MS, we wondered how such feelings of personal vulnerability might combine with the tenor of the rhetoric regarding the conflict from the other side. We suspected that in the absence of personal vulnerability, MS would lead to a more hostile stance toward an adversary. However, those who were likely to be personally affected by further hostilities would respond to MS with increased support of war only when adversary rhetoric made future attacks seem inevitable. Study 3 was designed to investigate the interaction of existential threat, perceived vulnerability, and hostile adversary rhetoric on support of violent solutions to conflict.

To increase the generalizability of the current findings, Study 3 addressed the response of Israelis to the threat posed by another group. Whereas the first two studies addressed the prospects of an Iranian nuclear threat on Israel, the current study examined reactions to a related threat—the conflict between Israel and the Iranian-backed Shiite paramilitary organization, Hezbollah. The main differences between the tensions with Iran and the conflict with Hezbollah is that whereas the conflict with Iran has not yet been manifested in a violent exchange between the sides, the violent conflict with Hezbollah is an ongoing conflict of over 20 years with a recent violent outburst in the summer of 2006—a year before Study 3 was conducted. In addition, a nuclear threat posed by Iran on Israel poses a direct threat to the entire population of Israel. The threat posed by Hezbollah has thus far primarily affected the residents of northern Israel who periodically experience missile attacks that exert a cost in human lives, destruction of property, and disruption of normal life. The residents of other parts of Israel may well experience the psychological effects of this conflict, but it does not influence their lives in such a direct and profound manner. However, one should also keep in mind that Hezbollah is a closer threat that is present on Israel’s northern border, whereas Iran is geographically more distant.

Thus, the current study examined the impact of death primes on support of an Israeli attack against Hezbollah, employing the two moderating variables of Studies 1 and 2. Escalation and de-escalation were operationalized using the scenarios of Study 1 that were modified such that they reflected the supposed opinions of Hezbollah leaders. To provide a converging operationalization of perceived personal vulnerability that is more objective in nature than the manipulations used in Study 2, we examined two groups of participants—those who lived in northern Israel during the summer of 2006 and were directly affected by Hezbollah attacks, and those who lived in other parts of the country and had no direct experience with these attacks and who generally do not think of themselves as likely targets of attacks from Lebanon-based Hezbollah. On this basis, we hypothesized that participants in the war exposure group would react to MS with greater support of violence only if they perceived enemy intent as highly malevolent. Participants in the no war exposure group, on the other hand, were predicted to react to MS with greater support of violence regardless of perceived enemy intent. Study 3 was conducted between June and December 2007.

Method

Participants. Two hundred and twenty-five participants (126 men, 97 women, 2 who did not report their gender) ranging in age from 18 to 57 (Mdn = 24) participated in the study for course credit. Participants were recruited to represent either civilians who had firsthand experience in the Lebanon War of 2006 (war exposure group) or those who had no previous firsthand war
exposure (no war exposure group). For the war exposure group, 127 participants were recruited from college campuses in northern Israel. Thirteen of these participants did not reside in northern Israel during the Second Lebanon War (summer of 2006) and were therefore removed from the sample, leaving 114 participants who met criteria for previous war exposure. For the no war exposure group, 116 participants were recruited from college campuses in central or southern Israel. Four of these participants served as reserve soldiers in the Lebanon War and another participant lived in a town that experienced missile attacks from the Gaza Strip and were removed from the sample because of their direct experience with the war. The remaining 111 participants did not report any direct experience with intergroup violence and therefore met criteria for the no war exposure group.

**Materials and procedure.** Experimental sessions were run in groups of 5-15 participants with experimental conditions randomly assigned within each session. A research assistant presented the research as a study of personality and social and political attitudes, and participants received a packet of questionnaires that they were asked to complete at their own pace. The first questionnaire was a bogus personality inventory intended to disguise the goal of the study.

Next, participants were randomly assigned to the MS condition and pain salience control condition as in Studies 1 and 2 and completed the distracter puzzle. Following the priming procedure, participants were randomly assigned to an escalation condition or to a de-escalation condition as in Study 1. In the current study the escalation and de-escalation conditions were based on the rhetoric of the leaders of Hezbollah who either supported another round of violence with Israel or preferred to keep the border quiet. Specifically in the escalation condition, participants read:

The leadership of Hezbollah has recently announced that it is determined to react with force against Israeli reconnaissance flights which violate Lebanese air space. Israeli Intelligence officials have reported increased Hezbollah activity close to the border with Israel, and a massive build up of arms in Hezbollah positions along the border. However, sources predict that Hezbollah is not interested in conflict with Israel, at this point, and that these steps were taken for deterrence purposes only.

Following these scenarios, participants completed a seven-item questionnaire tapping levels of support of a strike against Hezbollah. This scale was based on the questions used in Studies 1 and 2 that were also relevant to Study 3 (e.g., “Israel must attack Hezbollah now, and not leave the initiative in their hands”) and showed good internal consistency (α = .83). Upon completion of this scale, participants filled out a demographic questionnaire that included several questions regarding their personal exposure to conflict (e.g., missile attacks, terrorist attacks) and their perceived likelihood of being exposed to violent conflict in the future.

**Results and Discussion**

**Preliminary analyses.** To validate our assumption that participants living in northern Israel experienced a greater sense of personal vulnerability than participants living in other parts of Israel, we examined differences between these two groups of participants on two questions: (a) the perceived likelihood of a missile destroying their home in a future conflict (answered yes or no) and (b) the extent to which they were afraid that they might be personally hurt in a future violent confrontation (answered on a 7-point scale with 1 = not afraid at all and 7 = very much afraid). The results indicated that participants in the war exposure group (northern Israel) were significantly more concerned about a missile destroying their home compared to participants in the no war exposure group (other parts of Israel), χ²(1) = 13.47, p < .001, and they expressed more fear that they might be hurt in a future attack, t(217) = −2.37, p < .05. To rule out the possibility that other factors may explain the differences between groups, we compared the groups on age, gender, religiosity, political orientation, relationship status, and income. The results indicated no significant differences in gender, χ²(1) = .34, ns; religiosity, χ²(2) = .34, ns; political orientation, χ²(2) = .17, ns; relationship status, χ²(1) = .32, ns; age, t(220) = .25, ns; and income, t(219) = .19, ns. Moreover, regression analyses in which these demographic variables were entered first did not change the significant results reported next. These results increase our confidence that the differences between the two groups reflect differences in perceived vulnerability and not other factors.

**Main analysis.** To examine the influence of MS, Hezbollah rhetoric, and war exposure on support of a
military strike against Hezbollah, a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ANOVA was conducted with MS (death, pain), war exposure (war exposure, no war exposure), and scenario (escalation, de-escalation) as the independent variables and support of a strike against Hezbollah as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of war exposure, $F(1, 217) = 7.23, p < .01$, with participants in the war exposure group expressing greater support of a strike against Hezbollah than participants in the no war exposure group. This main effect was moderated by a significant MS $\times$ War Exposure interaction, $F(1, 217) = 5.96, p < .05$, and by the expected three-way MS $\times$ War Exposure $\times$ Hezbollah Rhetoric Condition interaction, $F(1, 217) = 15.08, p < .001$. To examine the source of this significant three-way interaction, we conducted two additional two-way ANOVAs for each war exposure group separately, with MS and rhetoric condition as the independent variables and support of a strike against Hezbollah as the dependent variable. The error term of the three-way ANOVA was used in each of these analyses.

The analysis conducted on the no war exposure participants revealed only a main effect of MS, $F(1, 107) = 5.94, p < .05$, indicating that reminders of death led to greater support of a strike against Hezbollah ($M = 4.43, SD = 1.23$) compared to the control condition ($M = 3.83, SD = 1.4$). There were no other significant main effects or interactions for no war exposure participants. Thus, no war exposure participants showed violence-supporting responses to MS regardless of the context provided by Hezbollah statements. However, war exposure participants revealed a two-way interaction between MS and scenario condition, $F(1, 110) = 23.91, p < .001$. Tests for simple main effects indicated that in the escalation scenario, MS led to greater support of a violent strike against Hezbollah compared to the control condition, $F(1, 110) = 9.12, p < .01$. However, in the de-escalation scenario, MS had the opposite effect and led to decreased support of a violent strike compared to the control condition, $F(1, 110) = 14.86, p < .001$ (see Figure 3). These findings integrate the findings of Studies 1 and 2 and indicate that perceived enemy intent moderates the effects of MS on support of a violent strike, but only when perceived personal vulnerability is high. When perceived vulnerability is low, MS leads to a less discriminating increase in support of violence regardless of perceived enemy intent.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

In recent years tensions in the Middle East have reached a new high. The possibility of Iran developing nuclear capabilities, increased terrorism, and harsh counterterrorist measures have exposed the population of this region to unprecedented threats. The escalating cycle of violence characterizing this conflict seems to have, at least thus far, served no practical purpose as it does not appear to have advanced either victory or peace. Why then do people continue to endorse the same violent solutions that have failed in the past? According to TMT, the motivation to act violently against an enemy who poses a threat to one’s ideology, belief system, and values confirms and protects the special status of one’s group, thereby bolstering the defense against death awareness that it provides. Research that has examined the propensity for violence following death reminders supports this conclusion and indicates that primes of death foster violent solutions to political conflict (e.g., Hirschberger & Ein-Dor, 2006; Pyszczynski et al., 2006). Thus, the cycle of elevated awareness of personal mortality that follows intergroup violence and leads to subsequent violence seems to defy common logic and promotes more violence rather than deters against it.

However, the results of the current research indicate that the effect of death reminders on the endorsement of political violence is not always as counterproductive as it may seem. The findings of three studies reveal that primes of death increase support of violence among Israelis against Iran and Hezbollah when the adversary is perceived as harboring hostile intents (Study 1), or when perceived personal vulnerability is low (Study 2). However, when the group in question is perceived as less hostile, or when personal vulnerability is high, primes of death have an opposite effect and decrease support of violent solutions to conflict. Study 3 combines the findings of the first two studies and indicates that among people without firsthand exposure to war (low perceived vulnerability), primes of death increase support of violent solutions regardless of perceived enemy intent. However, among participants with firsthand
war experience (high personal vulnerability), primes of death increase support of violence only when the enemy is perceived as malevolent and hostile but decrease support of violence if the enemy is perceived as attempting to alleviate tensions.

Both Studies 1 and 3 indicate that perceived enemy intent moderates the impact of death primes on support of violence. Generally speaking, under conditions of escalating enemy rhetoric, death primes increase support of violence, but when enemy rhetoric is perceived as less aggressive, primes of death have the opposite effect and reduce support of violence. However, there are important differences between the findings of Studies 1 and 3. In Study 1, this effect was found for the entire sample. In Study 3, this effect was found only among participants living in northern Israel during the Second Lebanon War who had been personally exposed to the consequences of a violent confrontation with Hezbollah but not among participants living in other parts of Israel who had no previous firsthand war experience.

The difference between Studies 1 and 3 may also indicate a difference in how Israeli participants perceive the threat posed by Iran compared to the threat posed by Hezbollah. Whereas recent fiery rhetoric from Iranian leaders and the possibility of attacks with nuclear weapons poses a potential threat to the very existence of Israel, a threat that all Israelis, regardless of place of residence, are exposed to, the threat posed by Hezbollah is less severe and has primarily affected only the residents of northern Israel who live within the range of Hezbollah rockets. In other words, in the face of the Iranian threat, all Israelis seem to experience high personal vulnerability. However, with regard to the threat posed by Hezbollah, high perceived vulnerability is experienced primarily among those within the range of Hezbollah’s missiles. Therefore, escalating or de-escalating enemy rhetoric had a moderating effect on support of violence against Iran for the entire sample but exerted an effect on the propensity for violence against Hezbollah only among Israeli participants who had firsthand exposure to the conflict along the Lebanese border.

It is notable that in Study 3 participants in the no war exposure group reacted to MS with increased support of violence regardless of enemy intent. This reaction is similar to reactions found in previous terror management studies on intergroup relations (e.g., Castano, 2004; Greenberg et al., 1990) and supports our contention that when perceived personal threat is low there is little deterrence against violence. In this case, MS increases the motivation to validate the worldview, reject competing worldviews, and aggress against a symbolically threatening other.

However, although participants in the no war exposure groups reacted to MS with greater support of violence, our findings indicate that participants in the war exposure group exhibited the highest level of violent inclinations. Somewhat counterintuitively, these participants favored initiating a violent attack when death was not salient and enemy leaders de-escalated their rhetoric. One possible explanation for this finding is that under conditions of low death awareness, the desire for retaliation and revenge may have been higher among participants with high war exposure. Because the Lebanon war was experienced by many Israelis as a humiliating defeat to an inferior force, the desire for justice and revenge may have been particularly high when the enemy was perceived as weak and attempting to appease (de-escalating rhetoric). Under low death awareness conditions and low personal vulnerability salience, the de-escalating rhetoric of enemy leaders could have been perceived as an opportunity to initiate an attack against Hezbollah and set the record straight. For the residents of northern Israel, the sense of “unfinished business” with Hezbollah may have been particularly salient when the awareness of death and personal vulnerability were low. However, under death salient conditions, and when the personal costs of conflict were accessible, even subtle insinuations of a possible nonviolent outcome led to a reduction in support of violence. Thus, under certain conditions the motivation to aggress against an enemy and validate the worldview is countered by the motivation to feel personally secure when death is salient. MS increases support of violence primarily when enemy intent is clearly hostile and perceived personal vulnerability is low.

**Real-World Applications**

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States and the 2004 train bombings in Madrid provide real-world examples of the contradictory effects of death salience on violent motivations. Americans perceived the September 11th attacks as the beginning of a violent and perhaps inevitable clash with radical Islam. Moreover, the attacks occurred during the presidential term of George W. Bush, a hawkish American president who expressed a clear intent of going to war against terrorism. The Spanish population, on the other hand, viewed the Madrid bombings as a reaction to Spanish support of the American war and not as a direct conflict between Spain and radical Islam. In their view, the terrorist attacks were not inevitable and could have been stopped if Spain had changed its foreign policy and withdrew its support from the war on Iraq. The difference between an imminent and unavoidable war from an American perspective and an undesirable and unnecessary war from a Spanish perspective led to diametrically opposed reactions to the attacks in both countries. For Americans, the seemingly inevitable route to violent conflict left the impression of
no alternative options, and then perhaps, elevated death awareness evoked terror management mechanisms in form of a symbolic war against evil. For the Spanish who perceived the terrorist attacks as the price they were paying for the ill-considered policy of their government, the elevated death awareness following the attacks made their own vulnerability to harm salient, and they reacted by replacing their leadership with a more peaceful one. The fact that the Madrid attacks occurred several days before the election probably only contributed to the Spanish sentiment that power was in their hands to avoid unnecessary violent confrontation.

These examples illustrate how perceived adversary intent influences support of violent solutions to conflict when death is salient. However, adversary intent in these cases was inferred from the prevailing geopolitical situation and not from communicated intents. It is often that communicated intent is met with skepticism as it is not clear whether the rhetoric of the leaders of a rival group represents a true shift in their policy or whether it is merely a ploy to obtain an advantage over their enemy. The Middle East conflict has been plagued by such mutual skepticism with leaders of both sides often accusing the other of “double speak” in which their peaceful rhetoric is perceived as incongruent with their hostile behavior. This explanation raises the possibility that war exposure participants in Study 3 of the current research reacted with greater violent inclinations to de-escalating enemy rhetoric because they perceived the message as insincere. In this case, de-escalating rhetoric may have had the paradoxical effect of raising one’s guard, as it seems to express a deliberate attempt to conceal malevolent intents. Future research should examine the role of perceptions of sincerity and deception in the other side’s rhetoric as determinants of the impact of mortality concerns on preferred approaches to ethnopoliical conflict.

Symbolic and Concrete Terror Management

The present studies represent a certain shift in the focus of reactions to reminders of death from a terror management perspective. Previous terror management research has focused on an abstract and nonimminent threat of death and on symbolic defenses that are employed to quell such existential anxieties. The current series of studies deal with real-life conflict that has symbolic as well as real implications. On the symbolic level, Iran and Hezbollah present a challenge to the predominant Israeli worldview on religious, cultural, and historical levels. Different conceptions of reality, morality and justice, and each side’s culpability lead to a clash between different death-denying worldviews. However, the conflict between Israel, Hezbollah, and Iran is also based on real, tangible threats that are periodically manifested in a violent flare-up between the sides, as well as in the possibility of a major future conflict that may have devastating consequences.

The studies reported here portray an interesting interplay between symbolic and concrete threats. It seems that on the symbolic level MS induces greater violent inclinations toward a worldview-threatening other. However, information concerning the aggressive tendencies of the other side or the salience of personal vulnerability to real harm moderates this effect. When the adversary is perceived as belligerent and unyielding, and perceived vulnerability is low, concrete considerations of the level of threat are in line with the urge to defend against the symbolic threat, and MS then induces greater violent inclinations. However, when the adversary is perceived as harboring nonviolent intents and when personal vulnerability is high, these two concrete considerations override the tendency to react violently when mortality is salient, and they actually lead to a significant decrease in support of violence. From an evolutionary perspective, concrete, physical considerations would be expected to take precedence over symbolic concerns when death is salient, as they are more acute and pose a threat to actual existence. Overall, this analysis suggests that MS does not automatically induce an irrational urge to act violently. Rather, it seems that rational and cost–benefit considerations (i.e., “How hostile is the adversary?” “How vulnerable am I?”) play an important role in regulating responses toward an adversary.

Conclusions

The current research reveals that the relation between MS and ethnopoliical violence is not an automatic, reflexive response wherein death reminders always increase support of violent solutions to conflict. Rather, our findings underscore the complex dilemma individuals experience when considering how to act in real-life political conflict. The intractable conflict between Israel and its neighbors provides an opportunity to understand the underlying dynamics that lead people to endorse or reject violent policies. The prolonged nature of the conflict, the failure of violence to solve problems in the past, and the awareness of the price one might pay for violent acts amplify the dilemma and accentuate the differences between terror management defenses that operate by bolstering the symbolic worldview and those concerned with the concrete need of protecting oneself. Our findings reveal that hawkish patriotism and self-protection go hand in hand when the situation is perceived as deteriorating toward unavoidable violence. However, when an opportunity to avert violence is present, or when the personal cost of violent solutions is painfully clear, it seems that self-protection has the upper hand and overrides the motivation to defend the worldview when personal death is salient.
NOTES

1. Iran’s Vice President Esfandiar Rahim-Mashaei had said “Iran wants no war with any country, and today Iran is friend of the United States and even Israel. . . Our achievements belong to the whole world and should be used for expanding love and peace” (Haaretz.com, 2008). Following these statements Rahim-Mashaei has been the subject of fierce criticism from Iranian officials and was summoned to parliament for questioning. However, he reiterated this position a few days later.

2. In all three studies there were no significant gender effects and no interactions between gender and the independent variables.

3. To examine the influence of religiosity and political orientation we ran the analysis with either religiosity (religious, traditional, secular) or political orientation (left, right, center) as an additional independent variable. These analyses revealed a main effect for religiosity, F(2, 293) = 12.74, p < .001. Post hoc Scheffe analysis indicated that religious persons (M = 4.52, SD = .94) were significantly more supportive of violence than traditional (M = 4.02, SD = 1.05) or secular (M = 3.87, SD = 1.02) persons (all ps < .05). However, there were no significant interactions between religiosity and the other independent variables. Similarly, the analysis revealed a main effect for political orientation, F(2, 235) = 42.97, p < .001. Post hoc Scheffe analysis indicated that right wing participants were more supportive of violence (M = 4.6, SD = .81) than participants in the political center (M = 3.95, SD = .87), who were more supportive of violence than left wing participants (M = 3.34, SD = 1.01; all ps < .001). There were no significant interactions between political orientation and the other independent variables.

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