An Existential Perspective on Violent Solutions to Ethno-Political Conflict

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War would end if the dead could return. – Stanley Baldwin, British Prime Minister

The outbreak of violence between Israel and Hamas on the eve of the year 2009 surprised hardly anyone. The fragile ceasefire had come to an end, and the renewed missile attacks on towns and villages in the south of Israel were the appetizer preceding the inevitable main course of massive violent retribution. But, although the ebbing and flowing of violence in this region has become habitual, for many it is accompanied by an increased sense of frustration caused by the inability to move beyond violence to find a rational solution that will bring peace to both Israelis and Palestinians.

And what would be the rational solution to this bitter and seemingly intractable conflict? The dictum that “war itself is the enemy,” attributed to the Prussian philosopher van Clausewitz, has never resonated more strongly. The violent clashes between Israel and the Palestinians have resulted in significant losses to both sides with little gain, if any, to justify the price. Every round of violence ends with a new shaky agreement that differs ever so
slightly from the shaky agreement that preceded the most recent violent outbreak. Thus, time and again when the dust settles from the futile attempt to subdue the other, Israelis and Palestinians find themselves with no viable option but to find a way to live peacefully with one another. But no one seems capable of finding a way to achieve this peace.

Even more perplexing is the fact that since the 1993 peace accord between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), relations between the groups have significantly deteriorated and violence has reached an unprecedented level. The Israeli disengagement from Gaza in the Summer of 2005 was intended to reduce friction between Israelis and Palestinians, but it failed to live up to its promise of breaking the cycle of violence and may have inadvertently contributed to the recent escalation of violent conflict. How can we explain that despite mounting evidence of the futility of violence, and the obvious need for reconciliation among the various factions, there seems to be no end in sight to perpetual warfare? And why has every step taken toward peace paradoxically resulted in a spiral of bitter violence?

One possible answer that many Israelis and Palestinians seem to adhere to is that the other side has proven to be duplicitous, inhumane, and ruthless, using peace as a cover for malevolent intentions. In the present chapter we provide an alternative answer to these questions and argue that powerful psychological forces underlying ethno-political conflict hamper the ability to achieve peace, even when peace seems to be a rational solution that would benefit all. We base our analysis on terror management theory (TMT; e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997) and demonstrate, with a body of research conducted recently in Iran, Israel, Europe, and the United States, how existential concerns underlie the proclivity to choose violent solutions to ethno-political conflicts. We also show that the link between mortality concerns and ethno-political violence is not inevitable, and that at times mortality concerns can even reduce violent inclinations. We suggest that a better understanding of the
role played by mortality concerns in political reasoning provides insight into ways to move beyond violence and to promote peace.

Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg et al., 1997; Pyszczynski et al., 2003) is an integrative social-psychological theory based on the influential writings of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1973). TMT contends that the instinctive animal desire for continued life juxtaposed with the uniquely human awareness of the inevitability of death creates a potential for paralyzing terror, and that effective regulation of ongoing human behavior requires that this potential for terror be effectively managed. According to TMT, existential terror is managed and security is provided by: (1) a cultural worldview that provides an explanation for existence, standards through which one can attain a sense of personal value, and the promise of literal or symbolic immortality to those who live up to these standards; (2) self-esteem, which is acquired by believing in the cultural worldview and living up to its standards; and (3) close interpersonal relationships.

Terror management defenses are fragile social constructions that require ongoing validation from others if they are to promote effective functioning. Faith in one’s worldview, the sense of personal value derived from living up to social and cultural standards, and the anxiety-buffering effectiveness of these structures is bolstered by others sharing one’s beliefs, and diminished when others adhere to a different system of values and beliefs. According to TMT, because these terror-management processes protect people from deeply rooted existential fears, much social thought and behavior is oriented toward maintaining them and defending them against threats.

Because of the fragile nature of culturally derived forms of defense, threats to these symbolic constructions undermine the emotional security that they provide, and motivate people to protect their death-denying mechanisms to ward off the threats. Although
consensual validation of worldviews and self-conceptions is needed, it may not be sufficient. When others hold beliefs that conflict with one’s own basic conceptions and proclaim their culture’s superiority or moral righteousness, they imply that one’s worldview is incorrect and one’s culture is inferior, which undermines one’s sense of value and meaning. Such threats to worldviews and self-esteem strip away an individual’s symbolic defensive shield and expose him or her to potentially debilitating death anxiety. To defend against threats to this symbolic shield, people may express anger and derogate the source of the threats, attempt to convert those who endorse different worldviews, or choose to demonstrate their group’s superiority by subduing, defeating, or even annihilating groups that challenge their worldview.

Terror management studies have tested these theoretical propositions by priming thoughts of death (heightening mortality salience, or MS) and examining cultural worldview defenses. The results of over 400 empirical studies conducted in 21 countries have provided support for the theoretical propositions of TMT. For example, studies have found that increasing the salience of mortality increases the motivation to invest in one’s worldview, and also leads to avoidance, derogation, and aggression against worldview-threatening others (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1990; Hirschberger & Ein-Dor, 2006; McGregor et al., 1998; Pyszczynski et al., 2006). These effects appear to be unique to thoughts about death. Other anxiety-producing activities, such as thinking about giving a speech, imagining physical pain, or worrying about life after college do not produce the same reactions as mortality salience (e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994; Greenberg et al., 1995). Moreover, TMT effects seem to be independent of conscious affect; they are not accompanied by an increase in negative feelings or mediated by such feelings (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999).

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

These studies have consistently shown that brief, unobtrusive reminders of mortality lead people to view their group in a more positive light, and view other groups in a more negative light – to the extent of derogating and even aggressing against other groups. Thus, it may seem that reminders of mortality instantly turn people into ethnocentric, prejudiced, and potentially violent automatons. Fortunately, TMT views the effects of MS on intergroup attitudes as more complex, and maintains that different people may react to MS in different ways, depending on individual differences and the situational context. For example, research has shown that whereas people with a conservative political orientation respond to MS with greater intolerance, people with a liberal political orientation respond to MS with greater tolerance (Greenberg et al., 1992). Other research has shown that MS leads to heightened ingroup affiliation only when the ingroup is portrayed as strong and successful, but leads to disaffiliation from elements of the worldview that reflect weakness or inferiority (Arndt et al., 2002 ; Dechense et al., 2000). MS also leads to distancing from ingroup members who threaten the positive image of the group (Hirschberger et al., 2005).
In the realm of political conflict, additional variables may enter into the equation and further complicate the effect of existential concerns on violent inclinations, so that mortality reminders may lead to support of violent solutions to conflict in some cases, but to a rejection of violent means in others. In this chapter we demonstrate, first, that mortality salience increases support for violent solutions to conflict, but that this link between death concerns and violent outcomes depends on three major conditions: (a) social/national consensus on the use of violence; (b) a sense that violence is justified and necessary; and (c) a sense that violence is imminent and unavoidable. In the next step, we outline conditions that may disrupt the link between death concerns and support for violent solutions to conflict, and demonstrate that thinking rationally about violence, and considering the consequences of violence, may moderate and even reverse the effects of MS on violent inclinations. In the final section of our analysis we focus on moving beyond violence and demonstrate that emphasizing basic human values and human similarities promotes more peaceful motives even when death is salient.

Part I: Existential Concerns Promote Political Violence

“It is in the sphere of terrorism and counter-terrorism that fear’s most harmful manifestations flourish.” – Irene Kahn, Amnesty International

The hypothesis that death awareness motivates violent solutions to political conflict is the most straightforward application of TMT to the realm of political psychology. War and terrorism simplify conflict and dichotomize groups into “us” and “them,” “good” and “evil.” Violence also offers hope for a clear-cut and long-lasting resolution of the conflict, the potential (or illusion) of pronouncing winners and losers, and a better future following victory. These attributes of political violence make it particularly attractive when death is salient, because under these conditions people are motivated to promote the triumph of their group and the thorough defeat of the opposition.
Indeed, research has revealed that mortality salience leads to greater support among conservative Americans of extreme violence against countries or organizations that pose a threat to the United States (Pyszczynski et al., 2006, Study 2). It has led in the past to Israeli settlers in the Gaza Strip and their supporters who refused to accept the 2005 disengagement plan to condone more violent resistance (Hirschberger & Ein-Dor, 2006). Research has also shown that MS led participants in Iran (Pyszczynski et al., 2006, Study 1) and in Britain (Routledge & Arndt, 2008) to express greater willingness to sacrifice their life for their country. However, despite the seemingly clear link between mortality concerns and support for intergroup violence, we contend that this link is neither automatic nor inevitable. Instead, it depends on three major conditions: perceived consensus, justice, and inevitability of conflict.

**Consensus**

Organized forms of violence, such as war and terrorism, depend to a large extent on the broad support of the populations for whom these actions are purportedly undertaken. When leaders receive the support of their people they feel less restrained in sending young men and women to the battlefield, and they are under less pressure from their publics to end the war. However, consensus is fragile, and often the price of war and the inability to achieve the expected outcomes instill doubt as to the legitimacy or efficacy of violent policies, concerns about the costs of such policies (in terms of loss of life, resources, and international respect), and the legitimacy and wisdom of the leader and his or her decisions. In such cases, public support at the beginning of a conflict can transform into disillusionment, frustration, and anger. Such was the case in the American war in Vietnam and more recently in the war in Iraq, where initial consensus and hope dissipated when the war failed to deliver its promise. In Israel, the Lebanon war of 1982, and to some extent the Lebanon war of 2006, were launched following missile attacks on Northern Israel and enjoyed public support until
the death toll rose, and it became evident that the declared goals of the war were not attainable by violent means.

From a terror management perspective, consensus is a necessary ingredient for the functioning of the cultural worldview as an effective anxiety buffer. Because worldviews are symbolic social constructions that are fragile and susceptible to disconfirming information, they require constant consensual validation. For consensus to be established and maintained it is necessary to believe that the threat is of such magnitude that massive use of force is the only effective response.

Consensus is clearly a requirement for military action in democratic societies, where leaders receive their legitimacy from the support of their constituents. There is good reason to believe that consensus is important for violent behavior in non-democratic societies as well. For example, in the Palestinian territories, suicide bombers are exalted as martyrs. Their pictures are posted on walls and buildings, and they are admired by children who view them as role models. Such idolization of people who are ready to kill themselves and others for what is considered a holy cause is necessary for the propagation of suicidal terrorism, because in return for a shortened life, terrorists gain fame, adoration, respect, and honor (not to mention several afterlife virgins). According to TMT, long-lasting fame and admiration may be more appealing than a longer life because they provide a sense of symbolic immortality – the feeling that certain aspects of the self will survive physical death.

Empirical evidence supports both the contention that mortality salience elicits more consensus regarding violent solutions to conflict, and the contention that consensus is a necessary precondition for mortality salience to elicit support for ethno-political violence. In a series of studies Landau and his colleagues (2004a) demonstrated that shortly after the beginning of the Iraq war, reminders of death increased support for American President George Bush and his counterterrorist policies. Other studies show that without a sense of
consensus, mortality salience may not lead to support of violence against other groups. In a unique study conducted in Iran (Pyszczynski et al., 2006), participants were assigned to either an MS or a control condition and then read a description of a student portrayed as holding commonly expressed views on political issues. Half of the participants read a description in which the student expressed support for martyrdom attacks against Western targets, and the other half read a description in which the student expressed disapproval of suicidal terrorism. The results indicated that MS led to greater support of martyrdom attacks only when the student expressed pro-martyrdom attitudes. However, when the student voiced opposition to suicidal terrorism, MS did not have a significant effect on support of violence. A more recent study demonstrated that MS increased support for terrorist violence among Iranians but that this effect was eliminated when participants were led to believe that the majority of their compatriots disapproved of such tactics (Abdollahi, Henthorn, & Pyszczynski, in press). These results indicate that for MS to elicit support for suicidal terrorism, participants had to feel that there was consensus among their peers supporting such violence.

Justice

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

Expected utility theory (e.g., de Mesquita, 1988) formalizes this assumption and posits that by
delineating the costs and benefits of conflict, political scientists may better understand the
motives for going to war. However, over the years scholars of conflict resolution have
concluded that rational factors alone do little to explain the outburst of violent conflict, and
that emotional and motivational factors such as anger, resentment, and revenge play a pivotal
role in the decision to engage in war (Bar-On, 2005; Baumeister & Butz, 2005).

The decision to use violence in inter-ethnic conflict may be driven so powerfully by
emotional factors such as anger, revenge, and the need to restore a sense of justice that
utilitarian considerations such as whether war is a good instrumental means of achieving a
desired outcome are ignored. In an analysis of five major international conflicts (including
the two world wars), Welsh (1993) concluded that the motivation to achieve justice or restore
justice has been a major factor in most global conflicts. Welsh further contended that the
sense of injustice involves powerful emotions that often hinder a rational analysis of costs
and benefits, and may lead to decisions that in retrospect seem hasty and impulsive.

TMT provides an opportunity to move beyond a rational analysis of violent conflict to
better understand the underlying motives that instigate violence, even when violence makes
little rational sense. In this section we argue that when death is salient, justice motives gain
prominence and may override utilitarian considerations to the extent that violence may be
exercised even when it is clearly counter to rational self-interest. Previous terror management
research has already demonstrated that MS increases just-world strivings (Hirschberger,
2006; Landau et al., 2004b), and Pyszczynski et al (2003) have argued that part of the appeal
of President Bush and his counter-terrorist polices – immediately following 9/11 – was that
existential fear increased the desire to vanquish evil and restore justice.

In a series of 4 studies conducted in 2008 (Hirschberger, Pyszczynski, & Ein-Dor,
2009a), we examined whether MS would increase justice motives for violence and whether
the motivation to achieve or restore justice would be greater than rational utilitarian
considerations. In Study 1, Israeli participants were randomly assigned to MS and control conditions and then read a description of a missile attack from the Gaza strip on an Israeli town. Some participants were told that security experts believed that a military incursion into Gaza was likely to significantly diminish Hamas’ ability to fire more missiles (utility condition). Other participants were told that security experts believed that an incursion into Gaza would not reduce Hamas’ ability to fire more missiles, nor would it effectively deter Hamas, but it would restore a sense of justice to the Israeli public (justice condition). All participants were asked to indicate their support for a military incursion into Gaza. The results revealed that in both the justice and utility conditions MS led to greater support of a military strike. These findings suggest that reminders of death increase support of violence, not only when violence has a clear purpose and is executed to obtain a concrete result, but also when violence is considered to be ineffective, but will contribute to feelings of greater justice.

The findings of Study 1 indicated that MS leads to greater support of violence for both justice and utility reasons, but they did not indicate whether justice motives are more prominent than utility motives when death is salient. In the next study we developed a scale to measure justice and utility motives for violence, which would enable us to measure these motives within each subject rather than manipulate them between subjects as in Study 1. In Study 2, we developed the Justice, Utility, and Peace Inventory (JUPI), which consists of questions favoring violence to restore justice (Justice factor; e.g., “A military strike on Gaza will make the Palestinians pay for their crimes”); favoring violence for utilitarian reasons (Utility factor; e.g., “A military strike on Gaza will reduce missile attacks against Sderot”); or opposing violence altogether (Peace factor; e.g., “A military strike on Gaza hurts the chances for peace”). A factor analysis confirmed the factorial structure of the JUPI, and correlations between the JUPI and other relevant instruments, such as the right-wing authoritarianism
scale (RWI) and the need for cognitive closure scale (NFC), established the construct, convergent, and discriminant validity of the JUPI.

Based on Study 2, in Study 3 we examined the impact of MS on JUPI factors. Following the MS procedure, participants were instructed to read a description of a missile attack from Gaza on an Israeli town, as in Study 1. However, in Study 3 half of the participants read that the attack resulted only in some minor damage and no casualties (mild outcome condition), and the other half read the description used in Study 1 wherein several people were killed or wounded during the attack (severe outcome condition). Then all participants completed the JUPI. Results revealed that in the mild outcome condition MS had no significant impact on the JUPI. However, in the severe outcome condition MS led to greater endorsement of the justice factor compared to the control condition. There was no significant effect of MS on the utility and peace items.

The results of Study 3 indicate that when participants are given the opportunity to endorse both justice and utility items, MS has a significant effect only on the justice items and not on the utility items. Furthermore, the impact of MS on justice motives for violence was evident only when the outcome of the attack was severe and not when it was mild. Perhaps for MS to increase justice motives one needs to be in an enraged state of mind that overrides rational considerations.

To test this possibility, Study 4 had participants first read an essay that either recommended making decisions based on rational considerations or an essay that argued that decisions are best made on an emotional, intuitive basis. Then participants completed the MS procedure and read a description of a panel of experts unanimously concluding that the appropriate response to a recent terrorist attack in Tel-Aviv would be a limited attack targeting only the person responsible for the terrorist attack, rather than engaging in a full-scale attack against Gaza. Following this description, participants were asked to indicate
whether, given the choice, they would favor a limited attack, as recommended, or a full scale attack; and they were asked to indicate to what extent they felt confident about their choice. Thus, MS, cognitive mode, and decision regarding the type of attack served as the independent variables. The level of confidence they expressed in the decision they made served as the dependent variable. Results revealed that participants who favored a limited attack were not significantly affected by experimental conditions. However, among those favoring a full-scale attack, MS led to greater support of an attack when participants were induced to make decisions based on emotions and intuitions. The results of Study 4 suggest that confidence in the decision to endorse a full-scale attack that is considered by experts to be counter-productive is greater under MS conditions, but only after participants are induced to think with their gut rather than their mind.

The prominence of justice and revenge motives in times of war is demonstrated in the following story: In the Gaza War of 2009 the three daughters of a Palestinian physician, Dr. Az-a-Din Abu El-Aish, who works at a large Israeli hospital, were killed while in their home. In his anguish and grief Dr. Abu El-Aish pleaded in a press conference that the violence be stopped and that Israelis and Palestinians find a way to live in peace. He also insisted that there was no reason to target his house as there were no terrorists or anyone shooting from it. A mother of an Israeli soldier angrily broke in to his speech and accused him of harboring weapons or terrorists, otherwise why would anyone bomb his house?

At first sight, this rude and insensitive interruption could be seen as the epitome of cold-heartedness. However, from a terror management perspective this behavior is different only in style, but not in essence, from other desperate attempts to defend the cultural worldview at all costs. From this point of view, Dr. Abu-Aish represented a severe threat to the predominant Israeli worldview which supported the war for two major reasons. First, he insisted that there were no hostile activities taking place in his house, undermining the
position that all the casualties of the war were justified. For the accusing woman (a mother of a soldier), the possibility that some of the killing in Gaza could not be explained or justified posed an unbearable threat to her belief system. Second, in spite of his devastating loss, the doctor remained steadfast in his belief in peace and co-existence, threatening the need to believe that the other side of the conflict consists only of inhumane, cruel, and savage terrorists. In her almost instinctive attack on the doctor (which she later regretted), the Israeli woman defended her worldview from the possibility that the war was anything but a just, moral, and necessary clash between the forces of good and evil. This small episode in a larger war consisting of many tragedies demonstrates the resistance of a population at war to any information that might undermine consensus that the war is righteous and justified. It is also a powerful demonstration of the workings of the justice motive and the mental acrobatics people will perform to convince themselves that wrongdoings committed on their behalf are justified.

The Inevitability of Violence

Rallying public support for a war not only requires that people perceive the cause as just and view their group as representing forces of good fighting against evil. People also need to believe that there is no alternative, and that war is imminent and unavoidable. For example, the American public perceived the September 11th attacks as the beginning of a violent and inevitable clash with radical Islam, and following the terrorist attacks support for President Bush and his war on terrorism was high. In contrast, the 2004 terrorist attacks on Madrid had the opposite effect – support for the ruling Partido Popular party diminished, probably in part because the Spanish population viewed the Madrid bombings as a reaction to Spanish support of the American war on Iraq, and not as a direct conflict between Spain and radical Islam. In their view, the terrorist attacks were not inevitable and could be stopped if Spain changed its foreign policy and withdrew its support from the war on Iraq.
The difference between an imminent and inevitable war from an American perspective, and an undesirable and unnecessary war from a Spanish perspective, led to diametrically opposed reactions to the attacks in the two countries. For Americans, the seemingly inevitable route to violent conflict left the impression of no alternative options and perhaps elevated terror management mechanisms in the 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 contributed to the Spanish sentiment that power was in their hands to avoid an unnecessary violent confrontation.

Recent research lends support to this analysis and indicates that when violence seems inevitable MS leads to greater support for violent solutions to conflict. In one study (Hirschberger et al., in press, Study 1), MS led to greater support of a pre-emptive strike against Iran after participants read a speech that was purportedly delivered by an Iranian leader calling for the destruction of the State of Israel and for the continued development of Iran’s nuclear program. In a similar study (Hirschberger et al., in press, Study 3), Israelis who lived in a region attacked by missiles during the 2006 Lebanon war expressed greater support of a pre-emptive strike against Hezbollah following MS, but only if they first read a passage describing Hezbollah as preparing for an imminent war with Israel.

Part II: Self-Protection Moderates Political Violence

Previous terror management research has focused primarily on an abstract and non-imminent threat of death and on symbolic defenses employed to quell existential anxieties. However, research conducted on current geopolitical conflicts and on the populations immersed in these conflicts must consider the fact that real-life conflict has not only
symbolic, but also real implications. Namely, as much as people engaged in conflict are concerned about protecting their symbolic death-denying structures, so too are they concerned about their own physical safety. Reminders of personal mortality have been shown to engage motivation to defend the worldview, but it is also very likely that they bring to mind the possibility of dying in a war. What determines people’s choice of war or peace when mortality is salient? So far, we have demonstrated that MS leads to greater support for political violence when social consensus is high, when the cause is perceived as just, and when conflict seems inevitable.

In this section we argue that MS will lead to less violent intentions when: (a) perceived personal vulnerability to conflict-related injury or death is high; (b) adversary rhetoric raises the possibility of a non-violent solution; (c) experts advise that violence is counter-productive; and (d) people are induced to think rationally.

To examine the role of perceived vulnerability and adversary intent in moderating the link between MS and political violence, we (Hirschberger, Pyszczynski, & Ein-Dor, in press) conducted a series of studies to examine the dynamic interplay between symbolic terror management defenses, concrete self-protection from physical danger, and their effects on support of violent solutions to political conflict. In Study 1, we focused on the growing tensions between Israel and Iran over the development of Iran’s nuclear program. Participants completed the typical MS procedure and were then randomly assigned to read either a conflict-escalating speech by an Iranian leader against Israel and the West, or a conflict de-escalating speech that implies that violence is not inevitable. Participants then rated their agreement on 11 items that described extremely violent reactions against Iran, including a pre-emptive nuclear strike. Results revealed that in the escalating-rhetoric-scenario condition, MS increased support of extreme violence against Iran, but in the de-escalating scenario the
opposite pattern was observed, and MS decreased support of extreme pre-emptive violence relative to the control condition.

Our interpretation of the results of Study 1 is that when violence seems imminent and unavoidable, as in the escalation scenario, MS increased violent motives. However, because MS makes salient not only the need for a symbolic worldview, but also the fact of personal vulnerability to harm and to death, when there were reasons to believe that violence might be averted, the need for personal safety overrode the defense of the symbolic worldview, and the motivation for violence was reduced.

To further test this explanation, we manipulated personal vulnerability in Study 2. Following the MS procedure and a description of the current state of tensions with Iran, participants were randomly assigned to two groups. The first group was asked to reflect on the possibility that they or their loved ones might be hurt in a future conflict between Iran and Israel. The second group was asked to reflect on the content of the passage. All participants then completed the same 11-item measure as in Study 1. Results revealed that participants who reflected only on the content of the passage responded to MS with increased support for pre-emptive violence. However, participants who reflected on their personal vulnerability to conflict-related harm responded to MS with decreased support for pre-emptive violence.

Based on the results of Studies 1 and 2, we attempted to better understand the impact on support of violence of the interaction between perceived adversary intent and perceived personal vulnerability. In Study 3, rather than manipulating personal vulnerability as in Study 2, we chose to focus on two groups of participants that differed in their level of exposure to war-related violence (matched on other potentially confounding variables). The first group consisted of participants who lived in Northern Israel during the Second Lebanon War against Hezbollah (summer, 2006) and had directly experienced missile attacks. The second group consisted of participants who lived in other parts of Israel and had never been directly
exposed to conflict-related violence. All participants completed the MS procedure and then read either a conflict-escalating speech or a conflict de-escalating speech by a leader of Hezbollah, and answered questions on support of a pre-emptive attack against Hezbollah.

Results revealed that for participants in the no-war-exposure group, MS led to greater support of violence regardless of Hezbollah rhetoric. However, among participants in the war-exposure group, MS led to greater support of violence in the escalation scenario, but led to a reduced support of violence among participants in the de-escalation scenario. These findings suggest that among persons who feel less vulnerable to conflict-related violence, MS leads to increased support of violence regardless of whether the adversary’s rhetoric is peaceful or belligerent. Ideological threat trumps practical concerns for one’s safety.

However, among participants who had experienced the war first hand, the influence of MS on support of violence was contingent upon adversary rhetoric: When it seemed that war was imminent, it increased support of violence, but when war seemed avoidable it had the opposite effect and reduced support of violence. When one’s own life and that of one’s family is on the line, people are more likely to consider nonviolent options when they perceive that violence can be averted.

Similar findings were obtained in the aforementioned research on justice and utility motives for violence (Hirschberger et al., 2009a). In Study 1 which measured whether utilitarian and justice motivations for violence would increase support of violence under MS conditions, a third group of participants were told that security experts believed that an incursion into Gaza would be counter-productive and was likely only to increase attacks against Israel (futility of violence condition). Counter to the other conditions, in this group MS significantly reduced support for political violence. In Study 3 of this research, which examined whether inducing rational or intuitive thinking influences the impact of MS on support of massive violent retribution, we not only found that MS led to greater support of a
full-fledged attack against Gaza when participants were induced to decide intuitively and emotionally, as previously mentioned. We also found that when participants were induced to think rationally, MS reduced support of violent retributions.

**Part III: Moving Beyond Violence**

The findings described in the previous section, demonstrating that self-protective concerns may override the need to defend the cultural worldview, and may lead to a reduction in violent motivations under MS conditions, are encouraging. But they still suggest that humans are defensive violence-prone creatures in one way or another. In this section of the chapter we demonstrate that focusing on common humanity with others, on compassionate religious values, and on feelings of psychological security enable people to transcend their fear and respond to MS with greater tolerance of others.

In a study examining American’s implicit attitudes towards Arabs (Motyl, Pyszczynski, Cox, Seidel, & Maxfield, 2007) participants completed the MS procedure and then either viewed pictures of White American families or viewed pictures of families from diverse backgrounds. The latter condition was intended to instill a sense of shared humanity in the participants. MS led to greater implicit negative attitudes toward Arabs only in the White family condition. In the diverse cultures condition there was no such effect, probably because, as hypothesized, viewing pictures of diverse families prompted feelings of common humanity with others. This explanation was supported in a follow-up study that asked participants to read accounts of childhood memories supposedly written by either Americans or foreigners. They were then asked to write about their own similar childhood experiences. Participants who read the memories of foreigners were more likely to agree with the statement that people around the world were basically the same, compared to those who read American childhood memories. In other words, the results showed that this induction did indeed promote a sense of shared humanity. Moreover, MS led to more anti-immigrant
attitudes only among participants who read the American childhood memories. Among participants who read foreign childhood memories, MS had no significant effect on attitudes towards immigrants.

In the same vein, in a study examining support of political violence in a sample of Israelis (Hirschberger, Pyszczynski, & Ein-Dor, 2009b) participants were assigned to either an MS condition, a pain salience condition, a “Holocaust as a crime against the Jewish people” condition, or a “Holocaust as a crime against humanity” condition (Based on Wahl & Branscombe, 2005). They then answered questions tapping support of violent solutions to conflict. In the MS condition and the “Holocaust as a crime against the Jewish people” condition, support of violence was significantly higher compared to the pain salience condition and the “Holocaust as a crime against humanity” condition. These results suggest that describing the Holocaust as a crime against the Jewish people led to effects similar to MS. However, framing the Holocaust as a crime against humanity reduced support for violent solutions to ethno-political conflict, probably because such portrayal of the Holocaust induced a sense of common humanity.

Another series of studies demonstrated that compassionate religious teachings moderate the impact of MS on support for violence against an adversary among Christian fundamentalists in the United States and Shiite Muslims in Iran (Rothschild, Abdollahi, & Pyszczynski, 2008). In both cases, MS led to greater support of violence against the other after reading a neutral text, and even after reading about non-biblical compassionate values. However, after reading about the compassionate teachings of Jesus or the compassionate teachings from the Koran, MS led participants to significantly reduce their support of violence against the other.

Research has also shown that feelings of security in close relationships reduce support for violence (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001). On this basis, Weise and his colleagues (Weise et
al., 2008) primed American participants with death and then asked them to visualize a warm and accepting personal relationship. Results revealed that the effect of MS on support for harsh counter-terrorism measures was reduced after participants thought about close personal relationships. Similarly, in a study conducted on an Israeli sample (Hirschberger, Arias Ben-Tal, Pyszczynski, & Ein-Dor, 2009), participants had to write a brief comment on a sketch of a woman breastfeeding her child (attachment security condition) or a sketch of a group of women working in a field (neutral condition) following MS. They were then asked to rate their approval of military force against the Hamas in Gaza. The effect of MS on support for military force was significant in the neutral condition but not in the attachment security condition.

Conclusions

The conflict in the Middle East that currently involves Israel, Arab nations, Iran, Europe, and the United States is concerned with disputes over land, water, oil, terrorism, occupation, historical rights, and religious promises. These important reasons notwithstanding, we have suggested in this chapter that human existential concerns also contribute to the perpetuation of this conflict and the inability to reach a peaceful solution. We have reviewed research that sheds light on the underlying mechanisms that transform unobtrusive, brief reminders of personal mortality into powerful motives to subdue an enemy. We demonstrated that perceived consensus, belief in a just cause, and belief that war is inevitable are powerful catalysts that amplify the impact of mortality concerns on support for violent solutions to conflict. However, we also demonstrated that when people focus on the personal price they might pay in a war, when they perceive the adversary as harboring less malevolent intentions, and when they are induced to think rationally, MS has a strikingly different effect and leads to reduced motivation for violence. Moreover, when people think of their common humanity with others, focus on compassionate religious teachings, or feel
secure in their relationships with others, the effect of MS on support for violence is significantly diminished.

To achieve peace in the Middle East, all involved parties will have to make painful compromises on the concrete issues at stake, but they will also have to change the way they think about their adversaries and transform the symbolic belief structures that contribute to the perpetuation of violence. We have shown here that deep-seated existential concerns lie at the heart of violent conflicts and render them resistant to change. However, our research also suggests that the path to real change and to peace requires that, as people and as nations, we confront our deepest fears with courage rather than denying them. Although many political plans for peace have been proposed over the years, none has been successful. Perhaps in addition to diplomacy and compromises aimed at producing a just resolution of the conflict, policies aimed at changing the psychological forces that promote hatred to those that promote peace are needed to involve people on all sides of the conflict in the process of peacemaking.

References


