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Emotional Distress, Conflict Ideology, and Radicalization

Daphna Canetti, *University of Haifa*

Terrorism and political violence (TPV), especially the indiscriminant kind targeting unarmed civilians, is one of the most severe challenges facing human societies. Direct ramifications are heavy, and can include loss of life and limb and a disproportional emotional reaction, particularly emotional distress. TPV also creates a considerable challenge for democratic societies. Often, there is a difficult tension between the essential need to feel secure and the aspiration to sustain democratic values and preserve democratic culture. More specifically, in times of terrorist threat and severe losses, when direct confrontation with the perpetrators of terrorism is either impossible or does not guarantee public safety, emotional distress is frequently aimed at minority groups. Alongside ideology, emotional reactions—which are generally overlooked in political conflict research (Costalli and Roggeri 2015)—can be easily translated into support for radicalization and nondemocratic practices.

This article examines the effects of individual-level exposure to TPV on radicalization via mechanisms of conflict ideologies and emotional distress. It first provides the political-psychological context of exposure to TPV. Next, it looks at the core elements of the argument, outlining the definitions of emotional distress and conflict ideology. The third section disentangles the ways in which exposure to TPV feeds into the process of radicalization. In tackling this subject in the Israeli-Palestinian context, I contribute to the burgeoning, if largely unreconciled, debate within political science over TPV and radicalization—that is, whether individual-level exposure of unarmed civilians to TPV prompts subject groups to pacify or radicalize. Some scholars find that TPV diminishes trends of radicalization, whereas most others posit the opposite. In concluding, I show how my research contributes both to debates within political science, as well as policy circles interested in the reactions of civilians exposed to TPV or threat thereof.

TPV includes violence waged between countries, protracted conflicts within countries, and terrorist attacks. Daily exposure to war-related events, including resurgences of TPV, cause civilian casualties. Civilians in societies suffering from conflict violence endure human and material loss, exhaustion, misery, uncertainty, grief, danger, demands for resources, and other grievances (Lyall, Blair, and Imai 2013; Zeitzoff 2014). Exposure to violence entails situations in which people experience direct or indirect harm. TPV is the harm inflicted on individuals amid war, terrorism, or general political violence—that is, loss of life and other grievances amid conflict such as the threat of loss or knowing someone who might be harmed (Hobfoll, Canetti-Nisim, and Johnson 2006) with physical, spatial, and emotional aspects (Canetti et al. 2014). This is true for both relatively circumscribed and acute incidents of TPV (e.g., NYC September 11, 2001; Madrid March 11, 2004; London July 7, 2005; or Oslo July 22, 2005), and cases of protracted violence.

Exposure to TPV can elicit severe emotional distress, impaired mental health, and eventually support for further political violence. Post-traumatic stress (PSS) is one such debilitating emotional injury; symptoms include a re-experiencing of the traumatic event, avoidance of reminders of the trauma, emotional numbing, and hyperarousal (Spitzer et al. 1994). The appraisal of danger that the "other side," or out-group, poses to the life or well-being of the individual or in-group, is inherent to PSS (Canetti-Nisim et al. 2009). Studies of the psychological implications of terrorist attacks in the United States (Schuster et al. 2001), Spain (Miguel-Tobal et al. 2006), and the UK (Rubin et al. 2007), have also pointed to PSS as a major emotional reaction to TPV exposure. Further, the more individuals are exposed to TPV, the more likely they are to fall into a trajectory of chronic poor mental health (Hobfoll, Canetti-Nisim, and Johnson 2006). If the actions of others have been threatening, and if that threat has had emotional consequences, then counter-aggression may be one coping response (Chemtob et al. 1994). Stress symptoms resulting from exposure to TPV can lead to aggression, militancy, ethnic exclusion, and other forms of radicalization for defense and protection (Hobfoll, Canetti-Nisim, and Johnson 2006; Canetti et al. 2009).

Conflict ideology constitutes a coherent worldview often prevalent in one's culture, which can provide a sense of meaning in the face of threats. Ethos is a specific case of political ideology of conflict that is prevalent among societies involved in intense violent conflicts. It is a set of shared conflict-supporting narratives, with an ideological structure, that decrease support for the peaceful resolution of intractable conflicts. It can serve as a system-justifying ideology, and thus may play an important role in the effects of exposure on coping with adversity created by political conflict. Ethos of conflict is likely to decrease support for the peaceful resolution of protracted conflicts. It serves as a useful coping mechanism for societies exposed to waves of TPV, yet impedes conflict resolution (Bar-Tal 2013).

This conflict-supporting ethos comprises beliefs related to justness of goals, victimization, security, positive collective self-image, de-legitimization of the opponent, patriotism,

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unity, and peace. By adopting this ethos, in-group members are portrayed as patriotic, peace-loving victims of the adversary's violence—out-group members are portrayed as untrustworthy and inhumane. On the personal level, the conflict-supporting ethos provides meaning for reality and a sense of control. It plays an important role in helping members of society cope with psychological and emotional distress. On the collective level, it provides a dominant orientation to conflict, creates a positive collective identity, binds members of society together, and gives meaning to societal life. Its orientation strives to preserve the existing order, continuing the conflict without the risk of dealing with the uncertainty that peacemaking requires. These conflict-supporting beliefs become the prism through which society interprets reality, accumulates information, and creates its political attitudes (Bar-Tal 2013). Society exerts great efforts to ensure that its members adhere to the dominant ethos by disseminating it through educational and cultural institutions. Meanwhile, alternative knowledge about possibilities of peacemaking is rejected or prevented from penetrating the social sphere.

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HOW EXPOSURE TRANSLATES INTO RADICALIZATION

Emotions are residues of exposure to life events (Peterson 2017, this issue) and external shocks (Nussio 2017, this issue), and propel different kinds of violent behaviors, as a way of coping with the situation (Van Stekelenburg 2017, this issue). I argue that individual-level exposure to political violence that results in emotional distress affects political worldviews. Numerous studies have examined the psychological impact of exposure to TPV and terrorism's political consequences. However, only a few studies have addressed the linkage between emotional distress resulting from exposure—which is more pervasive than would seem—and political outcomes. The relationship between TPV and its political reactions has been deeply contested. On the one hand, there is no shortage of examples of exposure to political violence that lead to pacification and served as a source of empathy and compassion (e.g., Beber, Roessler, and Scacco 2014). More often however, exposure to political violence seems to be a primary source of radicalization—militant sentiments, support for paramilitary groups, and movement of momentum towards a violent spiral of conflict (Hayes and McAllister 2001; Kocher, Pepinsky, and Kalyvas 2011; Echebarria-Echabe and Fernández-Guede 2006). This radicalization also stems from a host of other mechanisms such as threat, trauma, or revenge motives (Canetti, Hirsch-Hoefler, and Eiran 2014).

Individual exposure to political violence can result in drastic, sometimes long-lasting, changes in physical and mental health, which in turn has implications for the wider politics of conflict, including radicalization (Gould and Klor 2010; Getmansky and Zeitzoff 2014) and the evolution of radical positions such as racism or support for the denial of human and civil rights (Fisher 2017). To cope with a high level of violence, groups may develop a set of positions, which eventually increase the level of violent conflicts. This is a paradox of a psychological rationale to develop radical political positions to cope with high levels of threat. This happens when people exposed to TPV feel threatened and vulnerable as a result of their exposure. Such emotional distress, in turn, exacerbates conflict ideology, which further invoke "buffers" such as political radicalization. The outcome, however, is irrational—it perpetuates violence.

In times of stress and threat, there is a strong need to reduce uncertainty by creating a comprehensible and coherent environment that provides a meaningful picture of traumatic events. This process helps facilitate coping with the adverse psychological implications of TPV, particularly when exposure to such events is ongoing. Not all ideologies are equally effective in buffering such aversive effects.

The need to reduce uncertainty and threat is best served by embracing conservative ideologies which offer simple, rigid, solutions (Jost and Hunyady 2005). Conservative political ideas are adopted because they provide comfort for those who are made anxious by change and instability, serving the function of defensive coping (Hobfoll, Canetti-Nisim, and Johnson 2006). Coping with emotional distress resulting from traumatic experience involves changing one's assumptive world to match the experience. Given emotional distress, people are likely to adopt conflict ideologies corresponding to their newfound perception of the world as hostile and dangerous.

Following 9/11, researchers began to systematically examine the disproportional psychological and political reactions to TPV (Davis and Silver 2004; Canetti-Nisim et al. 2009; Laor et al. 2010). Concomitant psychological distress plays an important part in modifying ideologies. Exposure to rocket fire, bombs, terrorism, or air strikes boosts intransigence and support for further violence. Emotional distress coupled with conflict ideology are the drivers of radical political positions such as political intolerance, extremism, support for violence, and banning of human rights. Empirical work indeed shows that exposure to TPV triggers substantial levels of emotional distress (Canetti-Nisim et al. 2009; Canetti et al. 2010), which in turn, predict the development of radical political positions. In Rwanda (Pham, Weinstein, and Longman 2004) and in Uganda (Vinck et al. 2007), civilians who experienced traumatic exposure to conflict violence had higher prevalence rates for emotional distress, and high rates of belief in violence.

Theories of distress resulting from exposure to TPV emphasize the importance for the coping process. Finding meaning,

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establishing a coherent worldview, and adherence to a strong ideological belief may attenuate the effect of exposure to political violence on emotional distress. For instance, high exposure to traumatizing events prompts a significant conservative ideological shift, which is strongly associated with increased desires for revenge, militarism, racism, and violence. While the conflict ideology may play a role in coping with emotional distress, this association may increase support for radical political positions. Such system-justifying ideologies that defend the status quo are efficient for coping with grievances (Canetti et al. 2017; Jost and Hunyady 2005; Kaplan et al. 2005; Longo, Canetti, and Hite-Rubin 2014).

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CONCLUSION

Does violence beget violence? Despite recent developments in the study of political psychology of civilians facing TPV, the role of emotional distress and ideology in shaping radicalization of political positions is not really borne out. This paper highlights the role played by individual-level exposure, coupled with emotional distress and conflict ideology, in acting as a springboard to radicalization and a barrier to peace. Alongside other contexts threatened by TPV, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict offers ample evidence that waves of violence will continue to take their psychological and political toll. Civilian casualties constitute obstructions to breaking the cycle of violence, as emotionally affected civilians usually become increasingly radical. Notwithstanding the importance and relevancy of emotions like rage, anger or humiliation, and given burgeoning rates of emotional distress in societies struck by TPV, emotional distress is at the heart of this paper. Civilians victimized by violence who suffer from symptoms of emotional distress may find that hardening their hearts by adopting defensive conflict ideologies aimed to protect the self (Hirsch-Hoefler et al. 2014; Hobfoll et al. 2006), constitutes the most effective means for them to help themselves. However, these conflict ideologies perpetuate the conflict by increasing support for militant policies. Mental health is a key contributor to many of the underlying conflict ideologies that perpetuate the continued cycle of radicalization. No intervention will be as momentous as peace, but this article indicates how psychologists can increase resilience and limit emotional distress that might help to soften many of the underlying ideologies that perpetuate radicalization and violence. Promotion of mental health is essential in laying the groundwork for de-radicalization.

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