

# Rethinking Rage in the Middle East

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In September of last year, Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas petitioned the United Nations for full membership in the world body. For many Palestinians, this event was a potent and long-overdue symbol of their statehood, a cause for celebration. For many Jewish Israelis, the Palestinians' bid was a betrayal of the spirit of ongoing peace negotiations in the region. For many others around the world, it was just one more flash point in the seemingly endless and intractable conflict between Israel and Palestine.

The event sparked intense emotions, from righteous resentment to hateful rage, and these emotions did indeed threaten the halting peace negotiations. Some Israelis vowed to abandon the process altogether, while others demanded even more belligerent policies toward Palestinians. In this highly charged situation, emotions trumped deliberation and reason.

But did it have to work this way? The emotional reaction was perhaps understandable, given the long history of conflict between the two nations, but was there any way to defuse the raw feelings and keep them from spilling over into the policy arena? This question is at the heart of a new study by psychological scientist Eran Halperin of the Interdisciplinary Center in Israel. Halperin and colleagues wondered if people in an emotionally charged situation might be capable of regulating their intense feelings—and remaining cool-headed decision makers.

To explore this possibility in the laboratory, the scientists trained a group of Jewish Israelis in a technique called cognitive reappraisal. Reappraisal involves rethinking the meaning of a situation in order to alter the emotional response. The scientists showed all the volunteers a series of photos, chosen to spark anger, but some of the volunteers were taught to respond to these intense images like scientists—objectively, analytically, in a cold and detached manner. The others, the controls, received no instructions.

Then the scientists deliberately tried to provoke nationalistic anger. They put on a presentation—including pictures, text and music—about Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian response, including the launching of rockets, the election of Hamas, and the kidnapping

of an Israeli soldier. They knew that this reminder would induce an outraged response, but they told those who had been trained in reappraisal techniques to apply them to these emotional events.

Afterward, they gauged all the subjects' levels of negative emotion, including anger, rage, hatred and fear. They also quizzed the subjects on various issues of policy: Should Israel provide food and medication to Gaza residents, regardless of security threats? If a terrorist is identified in a building of civilians, should Israel bomb the building, even if it means killing the civilians? They wanted to see if there was a difference in how aggressive or conciliatory the trained and untrained volunteers were.

There was a big difference. Not only did the trained volunteers feel less anger toward Palestinians, they were also more likely to endorse conciliatory policies and less likely to advocate aggression. The cognitive training diminished the intergroup anger that fuels aggressive attitudes and policies, leading to a de-escalation of political conflict.

Political attitudes, especially those related to such an emotional conflict, are considered deep-rooted, rigid and highly resistant to change. So these lab results are quite remarkable. But the scientists wanted to see if this attitude shift was lasting, and they also wanted to test the concept in the real world—using a real political provocation. They decided to use the Palestinian bid for UN recognition as that event.

It was no secret last summer that Mahmud Abbas intended to petition the UN, so the scientists had time to plan their experiment to make use of the upcoming announcement. Six days before the event, they recruited a different group of Jewish Israelis, and again trained only some of them in cognitive appraisal techniques. A week after the training (and two days after the Palestinian petition to the UN), the scientists assessed their emotional and political reactions to the event. They assessed them again five months later. In addition to taking an emotional inventory, the volunteers answered such questions as: If the Palestinians withdraw their UN bid, should Israel cede more territory in the West Bank? If Palestinians begin to march to Jerusalem, should Israeli forces use ammunition to stop them? And so forth. As before, they were comparing the trained and untrained volunteers on conciliatory and belligerent attitudes.

The results, to be published in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, were unambiguous. Immediately after the UN bid, those trained in reappraisal expressed less negative feelings toward Palestinians. They were more conciliatory in their policy positions, and much less likely to advocate hostile action. These emotions—and the peaceful policy positions they led to—endured even five months after the heat of the event.

Halperin and his colleagues consider their findings preliminary but provocative. Political positions in conflict situations are believed to be driven by ideology rather than emotion—and to be entrenched. These hopeful findings suggest that there may be interventions that incorporate cognitive reappraisal to deflate negative emotions, alter aggressive intentions, and boost support for peace.

Wray Herbert's book, [On Second Thought](#), is about irrational decision making. Excerpts from his two blogs—"Full Frontal Psychology" and "We're Only Human"—appear regularly in [The Huffington Post](#) and in *Scientific American Mind*.