

The Effect of Sociopsychological Barriers on the Processing of New Information about Peace Opportunities

Roni Porat^{1,2}, Eran Halperin², and Daniel Bar-Tal³

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Abstract

During protracted intractable conflicts, society members develop a socio-psychological infrastructure that leads to selective and biased information processing, obstructing the penetration of new information that may facilitate peacemaking. To validate a process model that depicts the functioning of these barriers, we conducted a study among 207 Israeli Jews, focusing on the effects of long-term barriers on information processing. After measuring these barriers, we introduced an invented peace proposal and gave participants the option of processing additional information concerning its implications using the Decision Board Platform. Aided by this platform, we conducted an in-depth analysis of information acquisition strategies and found that four general worldviews (i.e., traditional and universal values, incremental theory, and authoritarianism) were associated with the ethos of conflict, which in turn was associated with the general amount and type of information processed. The theoretical and applied implications are discussed.

¹ Department of Psychology, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel

² School of Psychology, Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, Israel

³ School of Education, Tel-Aviv University, Tel-Aviv, Israel

Corresponding Author:

Roni Porat, Department of Psychology, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel.
Email: porat.roni@gmail.com

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An outsider observing the Israeli–Palestinian conflict might ask herself why, after so many attempts and initiatives have been placed on the negotiations table, the adversaries have failed to reach a settlement. Indeed, the “two-state solution” paradigm has been accepted by the majority of people in both societies for over a decade now (Bar-Tal, Halperin, and Oren 2010; Lavie 2010), but the parties appear nowhere near the achievement of a resolution. Moreover, the solutions proposed over the years of negotiations by both officials and nonofficials follow a similar paradigm and have in fact established clear contours to the possible peaceful resolution of the conflict. In fact, US president William J. Clinton’s parameters from 2001, the Arab peace initiative from 2002, and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s proposal from 2008 all identify the need to partition the land along the lines of the 1967 borders, transfer control over the eastern neighborhoods of Jerusalem to the Palestinians, find a fair solution to Jerusalem’s holy sites, and formulate a just and agreed solution to the Palestinian refugee problem (Lavie 2010). Thus, one might ask, “If the tangible solution is so clear, what is holding the parties back?”

Our contention is that despite the acceptance of the “two-state solution” paradigm, there still remain very real disagreements that in some cases are quite difficult to bridge, especially with regard to the execution of this general framework. More important to this study are the additional underlying forces that inhibit progress toward a peaceful resolution, termed *sociopsychological barriers* (Ross and Ward 1995; Bar-Tal and Halperin 2011). According to Bar-Tal and Halperin (2011), “these barriers pertain to the integrated operation of cognitive, emotional and motivational processes, combined with a pre-existing repertoire of rigid supporting beliefs, world views and emotions that result in selective, biased and distorted information processing” (p. 220).

The first to discuss psychological barriers was Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in his speech before the Israeli parliament (the Knesset) in 1977. In that speech, Sadat (November 1977) played the role of a lay psychologist, discussing not only the pivotal role played by sociopsychological barriers in perpetuating the Israeli–Egyptian conflict but also mentioned the actual cognitive mechanism through which they operate: “distorted and eroded interpretation of every event and statement.” According to this view, which was later supported by empirical findings (e.g., Halperin and Bar-Tal 2011), sociopsychological barriers lead to processing that obstructs and inhibits the penetration of new information that could otherwise facilitate progress in the peace process.

Sociopsychological barriers have been researched over the years by different scholars. The first scholar to discuss (and then empirically examine) the concept was Stanford social psychologist Lee Ross and his colleagues (Ross and Ward 1995; Mnookin and Ross 1995; Maoz et al. 2002), who focused on cognitive and motivational processes. Examples of such processes include cognitive dissonance, loss

aversion, reactive devaluation, optimistic overconfidence, naïve realism, and divergent construal (Ross and Ward 1995).

Integrative Model of Sociopsychological Barriers

Recently, Bar-Tal and Halperin (2011) suggested a general integrative theoretical framework for sociopsychological barriers to conflict resolution. This framework combines short-term cognitive, motivational, and emotional elements with more enduring worldviews and conflict-supporting societal beliefs related to the conflict, to its history, and to the involved parties. Bar-Tal and Halperin's model points to four different groups of barriers that have an interactive influence on one another. The process begins with the first group of barriers, termed *general worldviews*. These include views and beliefs that are unrelated to the conflict in terms of content but provide the orientation and prism through which individuals perceive and interpret the conflict (e.g., general beliefs). These general worldviews are closely related to and feed into the second group of barriers, termed *conflict-supporting societal beliefs*, referring to beliefs that are directly related to the confrontation, as they evolve during the conflict, perpetuate it, and serve as an ideology within it (Bar-Tal 2007). The third group includes *negative intergroup emotions* toward the adversary, which freeze the conflict-supporting societal beliefs, making them more rigid. Finally, the fourth group of barriers discussed in the model contains the *universal cognitive motivational biases* suggested by Ross and his colleagues (Ross and Ward 1995). These serve as pivotal barriers during the actual negotiation process, with a new proposal or new information entering the public discourse, as they impede mutually beneficial exchanges of concessions.

According to the model, the general worldviews, together with conflict-related events, provide the basis for the evolution of the ideological conflict-supporting societal beliefs, which are also termed the *ethos of conflict* (Bar-Tal 2000, 2007; Bar-Tal and Halperin 2011). These beliefs provide the prism through which individuals perceive and interpret the conflict. In fact, the model suggests that the integrated operation of its components leads to closed-mindedness and biased, selective and distorted processing of new information, as it preserves and reinforces held conflict-supporting beliefs, rejecting any alternative information that could potentially serve to bridge the conflict's fundamental disagreements and induce support for compromises (Bar-Tal and Halperin 2011).

Interestingly, it is possible to differentiate among the four groups of barriers according to short-term and long-term processes. General worldviews and conflict-supporting societal beliefs can be seen as long-term processes—that is, while these barriers may evolve and change during the course of the conflict, they are continuously present, at different intensity (Bar-Tal and Halperin 2011). Conversely, discrete emotions and cognitive and motivational barriers are short-term barriers that arise only as a result of a specific event, such as a new proposal to resolve the conflict.

The current study focuses exclusively on long-term barriers, namely-general worldviews and conflict-supporting societal beliefs, and how they affect the processing of new information. Our goal is to examine the relationship between these barriers and the processing of information regarding a new proposal to resolve the conflict. To date, scholars have generally concluded that they lead to biased processing, but the literature fails to delineate the nature of these biases. Does biased processing mean more information is processed, or less? Do these barriers affect the type of information processed in terms of congruent versus incongruent information? Or do they generally affect the amount of information processed regardless of its content? In the current study, we elucidate the barriers to conflict resolution and then examine their interconnections and how they bias the processing of new information regarding the conflict. Thus, in the following pages, we provide a more in-depth overview of these groups of barriers.

Long-term Barriers: Their Nature and Implications

General world views include views and beliefs that are not directly related to the conflict, but the values, attitudes, norms and perspective they propagate, shape the orientation and prism through which an individual perceives and interprets conflict-related events. Thus, they influence how society members perceive the contested issues and form their beliefs about the nature of the conflict, the rival group, and their own group. As such, they feed into other groups of barriers and play a major role in sharpening the disagreements. Previous research has suggested that some of these views may play a negative role in the context of conflict (i.e., increase prejudice, boost ethnocentrism, increase adherence to conflict-perpetuating positions, etc.; see, e.g., Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997; Dweck and Ehrlinger 2006; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Golec and Federico 2004; Jost et al. 2003; Kossowska, Bukowski, and van-Hiel 2008; Levinson 1957).

Because a full list of these general worldviews is extensive, we decided to measure only a limited number of worldviews that previous research has linked to either biased processing tendencies or intergroup conflict. Specifically, we selected seven general worldviews that promote either open- or closed-mindedness. The first four are right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), social dominance orientation (SDO), traditional values, and conformist values. These four worldviews have been found to promote closed-mindedness, while the additional three, universalistic values, incremental theory, and openness to experience, have been established as promoting open-mindedness. We will now provide a more in-depth overview of these aforementioned barriers, beginning with the four found to promote closed-mindedness, and followed by the three promoting open-mindedness.

General Worldviews Promoting Closed-mindedness

RWA refers to a personality trait advocating a conservative view of the world, including adherence to traditional values and closure to new ideas, rejection of

minorities, anxious veneration of authority, and convention with vindictiveness toward subordinates and deviants (Altemeyer 1981, 1996). A number of studies have shown that RWA is associated with and also leads to prejudice against the other (e.g., Kossowska, Bukowski, and van Hiel 2008; Whitley 1999). This tendency is especially pronounced with regard to rivals in conflict (Cohrs and Asbrock 2009). Therefore, this worldview supports the societal beliefs of the ethos of conflict, which feeds into the conflict and prevents its peaceful resolution (Halperin and Bar-Tal 2011).

SDO is defined as a “general attitudinal orientation toward intergroup relations, reflecting whether one generally prefers such relations to be equal, versus hierarchical” (Pratto et al. 1994, 742). Within the context of conflict, SDO is related to central societal beliefs promoting the superiority of the in-group over the out-group. Such ideology promotes and maintains inequality, prejudice, and discrimination (Pratto et al. 1994).

Traditional values, as a category, foster respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas that represent society’s shared experiences and fate (Roccas, Schwartz, and Amit 2010; Schwartz 2005). They symbolize the group’s solidarity, express its unique worth, and contribute to its survival (Durkheim [1912] 1954; Parsons 1951). Thus, in the context of conflict, they relate to beliefs concerning the group’s goals, the importance of securing the group’s future, and patriotism (Halperin and Bar-Tal 2011). *Conformity values* support actions that are in line with social expectations or norms, inhibiting inclinations that might disrupt group functioning and its system (e.g., Kohn and Schooler 1983; Parsons 1951). These values provide the basis for maintaining conformity to the institutionalized conflict-supporting societal beliefs.

General Worldviews Promoting Open-mindedness

The *value of universalism* focuses on the understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection of the welfare of all people, as well as equality, social justice, and world peace. This value has been found to be related to positive attitudes toward the other (Jugert and Duckitt 2009; Sagiv and Schwartz 1995; Schwartz 2007) and toward compromises in conflict (Halperin and Bar-Tal 2011). Furthermore, this value has also been found related to openness to search for information. It reflects not only tolerance to various opinions but also broad-mindedness and openness—features that underlie the search for information of any kind (Schwartz 2005, 2007).

Incremental theory is a part of a larger theory termed Implicit Theories that refers to people’s beliefs about the malleability of groups (Dweck 1999; Halperin et al. 2011). The literature suggests that individuals differ with regard to the implicit theories they hold. Those who hold to incremental theory, according to which group qualities are malleable and can be changed, tend to possess an optimistic outlook on conflict resolution since they hold the belief that the rival group can change (Dweck and Ehrlinger 2006). In contrast, those who hold to entity theory, which

posits that group qualities are fixed and unchangeable, tend to hold conservative and conflict-supporting views because they believe that the rival group cannot change (Halperin et al. 2011). Studies have found that incremental theories regarding the malleability of groups may lead to more tolerance toward the out-group and foster openness, thus facilitating conflict resolution (e.g., Halperin et al. 2011).

Finally, *openness to experience* is one domain used to describe human personality in the five-factor model, containing six subscales: (1) fantasy—receptivity to the inner world of imagination, (2) aesthetics—appreciation of art and beauty, (3) feelings—openness to inner feelings and emotions, (4) action—openness to new experience on a practical level, (5) ideas—intellectual curiosity, and (6) values—readiness to reexamine own values and those of authority figures (Costa and McCrae 1992). In the context of conflict, openness is a crucial component with respect to the processing of new information.

The Ethos of Conflict

Unlike the general worldviews that, by definition, are not related to the conflict, the second group of barriers relevant to the current study, “conflict-supporting societal beliefs” (Bar-Tal 2007), is directly related to the confrontation, evolving during the conflict (Bar-Tal 2007). These beliefs, also termed the *ethos of conflict*¹ (Bar-Tal 2000), provide society members a stable conceptual framework through which they can organize and comprehend meaningfully the intractable conflict in which their society is involved with (Bar-Tal et al. 2012). The beliefs of the ethos serve this function by providing an epistemic basis for the conflict’s continuation with a one-sided, simplistic and dichotomous picture about the nature of the conflict, the out-group’s evil nature, and the in-group’s needs, motives, victimhood, and positive image (Bar-Tal et al. 2009). These conflict-supporting societal beliefs freeze and serve as explicit barriers to the peace process by preserving and feeding the actual disagreements (Bar-Tal and Halperin 2011).

With time, the societal beliefs of the ethos of conflict permeate into the fabric of society and can be viewed as a *rigid ideology* held by society members involved in an intractable conflict. They are often widely shared by society members and are maintained by societal institutions and channels of communication. Eventually the ethos of conflict contributes to the formation, maintenance, and strengthening of individuals’ social identity (Bar-Tal 2007; Nets-Zehngut 2008, 2011; Rouhana and Bar-Tal 1998) and serves as a main pillar for the emerged culture of conflict.

As ideology is considered a prism through which the individual observes and interprets reality, it affects the levels of openness to information (Bar-Tal et al. 2009). Indeed, previous research has linked ideology to information processing. In this vein, Jost and his colleagues (2003) concluded that political ideology should be viewed as a reflection of a motivated social cognition that may affect information processing. The bulk of research concerning motivated reasoning has suggested that the motivation underlying ideology may play an important role in the information

acquisition process. Accordingly, Kunda (1990) suggested that motivation may lead to biases in the cognitive process, specifically in strategies for accessing, constructing, and evaluating beliefs, and termed this process motivated reasoning.

Iyengar and Ottati (1994) suggested that people selectively expose themselves to information, with the goal of confirming their beliefs. They claim that understanding and interpreting new information is done in accordance with one's ideological perspective (also see Taber 2003; Hamilton, Sherman, and Ruvolo 1990; Maoz et al. 2002; Pfeifer and Ogloff 1991; Rosenberg and Wolfsfeld 1977). This way, ambiguous information is construed in line with the ideology (von Hippel, Sekaquaptewa, and Vergas 1995), as consistent information received more attention and is better remembered (Macrae, Milne, and Bodenhausen 1994; Stangor and McMillan 1992). Moreover, studies have suggested that society members tend to actively search for information that confirms their ideology (Schultz-Hardt et al. 2000).

Nonetheless, while studies have found that ideology affects processing tendencies, very little research has specifically examined conflict ideology in the context of information related to the possible resolution of the conflict. We have previously carried out two preliminary studies dealing specifically with this issue. In the first one, we found that participants with high levels of ethos of conflict tended to perceive photos depicting encounters between Palestinians and Jews differently than did those with low levels of ethos of conflict (Bar-Tal et al. 2009). In a more recent study, Halperin and Bar-Tal (2011) specifically focused on the effect of general worldviews on information processing through the mediation of two societal beliefs: delegitimization and victimhood. They found that the effect of the general worldviews on self-reported openness to new information was mediated by these two societal beliefs.

As interesting as they were, these studies did not test the influence of these two groups of long-term sociopsychological barriers on the actual dynamic of processing information related to opportunities for conflict resolution. The current investigation aims to fill this gap.

The Present Study

The main goal of this study is to empirically examine how general worldviews and the ethos of conflict operate as barriers to conflict resolution by leading to selective processing of new information related to new peace opportunities. In line with the presented conceptualization and studies, we hypothesize that particular general worldviews lead to selective processing of new information and that these effects would be mediated by the ethos of conflict. The importance of the current study lies in the fact that while previous studies on barriers to conflict resolution examined the end result of these processes (e.g., the acceptance/rejection of a proposal), the focus of the current study is on the processing phase. That is, how do the sociopsychological barriers actually operate, and, accordingly, how do people possessing these barriers process new information in the context of a new proposal to resolve the conflict? To what form of selective processing do these barriers lead?

Furthermore, while we can point to previous studies that have examined to some extent the relationship between societal beliefs and openness to information (e.g., Halperin and Bar-Tal 2011), we find several limitations with their measurement of openness to information. These studies used mostly self-report measures, such as asking participants explicitly about their willingness to acquire new alternative information about possible solutions to the conflict. We argue that such measurements provide only a partial picture of how new information is processed. Specifically, these measurements reveal very little about participants' actual processing behavior, as they do not examine, for example, the time spent acquiring information or the amount and type of information processed.

We conducted the study in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict following President Barak H. Obama's victory in the US presidential election in 2008. At the time it seemed that a new opportunity could emerge to promote the peaceful resolution of the conflict. The current study was carried out in October 2010, a few weeks after the first official meeting between Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, mediated by US secretary of state Hillary D. R. Clinton. During this time, as the ten-month long moratorium on construction in settlements had ended, the Palestinians were considering whether to continue with the negotiations process. This seemingly new opportunity to promote negotiations provided an excellent platform to examine our research questions.

Method

Sample

Participants were 207 Jewish Israeli students (85 men and 121 women, one subject did not report his gender), all freshmen from the government ($N = 103$) and psychology ($N = 104$) departments at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) in Herzliya. The average age of the participants was 23.64 (standard deviation [SD] = 2.30), with ages ranging from nineteen to thirty-three. In terms of religiosity, the majority of participants (76.2 percent) defined themselves as secular, 22.3 percent as traditional, and 1.5 percent defined themselves as religious. Politically, 48.5 percent of participants defined themselves as rightists/hawkish, 17.2 percent as centrists, and 34.3 percent as leftists/dovish.

Procedure

In order to psychologically separate the measurement of the independent variables (i.e., general worldviews and ethos of conflict) from the dependent (i.e., information processing), participants were told that they were taking part in two separate and unrelated studies put together due to administrative reasons. The first seemingly consisting of a questionnaire, and the second was presented as an online assignment. The study was carried out at the computer labs of the IDC campus with groups of

twenty to thirty-five students during their orientation week (the first week of the undergraduate program). We began the first stage by administering a number of different scales assessing the sociopsychological barriers. In this part of the study, which lasted about twenty minutes, participants filled out a questionnaire that included several measures, such as general worldviews (i.e., RWA, SDO, traditional, conformity and universal values, incremental theory, and openness) and a scale of the ethos of conflict (Bar-Tal et al. 2012). The administered measures were based on well-established scales that have been used in previous studies. In addition, socio-political information was obtained regarding participant's level of religiosity and political orientation.

The second stage began immediately after all participants in the classroom had finished answering the questionnaires. The instructor thanked the subjects for participating in the first study, and told them that they would now be beginning a new study, unrelated to the questionnaire they had just answered. This stage included an interactive computerized exercise using the Decision Board 4.0 Platform (Mintz et al. 1997; Mintz 2004; Mintz, Redd, and Vedlitz 2006) for tracing information processing and decision making processes. First, participants were told that during the last round of negotiations Palestinian president Abbas had put forth a new peace proposal. After presenting the outline of the proposal,² participants were told that they could acquire, using the Decision Board Platform, further information regarding the proposal and its implications for Israel's interests, and subsequently make their decision regarding the proposal. This platform identifies the amount and type of information that the decision makers process when faced with a new peace proposal (Ford et al. 1989; Mintz, Redd, and Vedlitz 2006; Redd 2002).

The Decision Board Platform and its Use in the Current Study

The Decision Board Platform was constructed on the basis of established process-tracing methodology that has been used with various research questions. For example, it was used in the studies of cognitive algebra in political decision making (e.g., Taber and Steenbergen 1995), in studies for tracing compensatory and non-compensatory strategies of decision making (Lau and Redlawsk 1992), in studies of voter's choice, and in studies of foreign policy decision making (e.g., Mintz, Redd, and Vedlitz 2006).

The Decision Board 4.0 was developed by Mintz and his colleagues (1997) to trace each participant's decision process by recording their "moves" on the board. The core structure of the board is a matrix consisting of several alternatives and dimensions on which the alternatives are evaluated. Each participant is asked to choose an alternative, while utilizing the information basis of the matrix. The cells in the matrix provide new information and can be opened to reveal their content by a click of the mouse. A final decision is made by clicking on the choice cell of the desired alternative.

The board records key features of the decision-making process that are utilized to identify the decision strategies of the decision maker. It records the number of items viewed for every alternative along every dimension; measures the time elapsed from the beginning of the task until the decision maker has reached his or her final choice; and displays the “decision portrait” of the decision maker. The database formed for each subject allows the researcher to identify the processing characteristics of the decision maker and to calculate information acquisition patterns (Mintz 2004).

As noted, in the present study, participants were presented with a short scenario that described a new peace proposal presented by Palestinian president Abbas to Israeli prime minister Netanyahu during the last round of negotiations (the Appendix contains the full proposal). After describing the different components of the proposal, subjects were asked to choose which alternative (of five possibilities) they thought the government of Israel should select. They were also told that they could acquire new information regarding the implications of the various alternatives via a matrix that was prepared at the request of Netanyahu by top experts from different fields and political affiliations. The matrix consisted of the five alternatives that were evaluated across four themes, representing the core interests of the Israeli government with respect to the decision at hand. The themes concerned issues of security, economics, the state of the Israeli society, and Israel’s international standing.

The 5×4 matrix (alternatives \times themes) consisted of twenty information cells describing each alternative’s implications in every theme (see Figure 1). For example, the alternative of accepting the full proposal across the theme of security stated “In the short term, terrorist organizations with the support of Iran will probably try to sabotage the negotiation process by launching of missiles and terrorist attacks. In the long term, the proclamation of the final borders between the two states, as well as the presence of an international force, is expected to reduce the Israeli Defense Forces’ workload and the risk of terrorist attacks from the Palestinian state.” Thus, the matrix contained a considerable amount of new information that could be obtained by the participants before making their final decision (the full matrix including the text in each of the cells can be found in the supplementary materials section). Subjects indicated their final decision by clicking on a cell representing one of the five alternatives.³

Measures

Independent Variable—General Worldviews. As suggested by Bar-Tal and Halperin (2011), the list of potentially relevant general worldviews is very long, and a full examination of these is not feasible due to the limited scope of the current study. Thus, we decided to specifically examine worldviews that previous research has linked to either biased processing tendencies or to the ethos of conflict. Specifically, we chose four general worldviews that promote closed-mindedness and three that promote open-mindedness.

Scenario - a new opportunity to resolve the conflict put forth by President Abbas

Decision Board	Accepting the full offer	Accepting only the midterm agreement	Rejecting the offer, but agreeing that it will be the basis for negotiations	Rejecting the offer	Rejecting the offer and stopping negotiations
Security	⤵ Select	⤵ Select	⤵ Select	⤵ Select	⤵ Select
Economy	⤵ Select	⤵ Select	⤵ Select	⤵ Select	⤵ Select
Israeli society	⤵ Select	⤵ Select	⤵ Select	⤵ Select	⤵ Select
Israel's position in the world	⤵ Select	⤵ Select	⤵ Select	⤵ Select	⤵ Select
Final Choice:	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Final Decision

Figure 1. The Decision Board.

General Worldviews Promoting Close-mindedness

RWA was assessed using a twelve-item abbreviated version of Altemeyer’s (1996) original RWA scale (e.g., “Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children can learn” and “It is always better to trust the judgment of the proper authorities in government and religion than to listen to the noisy rabble-rousers in our society who are trying to create doubt in people’s minds”). The items were anchored at 1 (*completely disagree*) and 6 (*totally agree*), and the scale yielded an internal reliability of $\alpha = .71$.

SDO was measured using a sixteen-item scale developed by Sidanius and Pratto (1999). Examples for items included in the scale are “some groups are just more worthy than others” and “group equality should be our ideal.” The items were anchored at 1 (*completely disagree*) and 7 (*completely agree*). The scale yielded an internal reliability of $\alpha = .86$.

Traditional values were assessed using a three-item scale, also based on Schwartz’s (2007) original work. The scale included three key values of tradition: respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas that traditional values or religion provide to the self. The items from the original traditional values scale were worded in terms of one’s beliefs (e.g., “Religious beliefs are important to him/her” and “He/she tries hard to do what his/her religion requires”). Items were anchored at 1 (*not like me at all*) and 6 (*very much like me*), and the internal reliability of the scale was $\alpha = .45$.

Conformist values were also assessed using a three-item scale that was based on the seminal work of Schwartz (2007). The scale included three key values of conformity: restraint of action, inclinations, and impulses. The items were worded in terms

of one's beliefs (e.g., "It is important to him/her always to behave properly" and "He/she wants to avoid doing anything people would say is wrong") and were anchored at 1 (*not like me at all*) and 6 (*very much like me*), with the scale's internal reliability standing at $\alpha = .58$.

The reliability obtained from the latter scales (i.e., traditional and conformist values) was surprisingly low. Nevertheless, we decided to include them because they are well established and were extensively used in studies across the world, including within the Israeli-Jewish society. Indeed, the theoretical structure of Schwartz's value theory has been replicated in samples from sixty-seven nations (Schwartz 1992, 2005).

General Worldviews Promoting Open-mindedness

Universalistic values were assessed using a four-item scale adapted from Schwartz's (2007) work on values. The scale was found to have broad, cross-cultural applicability (see also Schwartz and Boehnke 2004). Following Schwartz's rationale, the scale consisted of the four key values of universalism: equality, social justice, broad-mindedness, and world at peace. The items were worded in terms of one's beliefs (e.g., "He/she thinks it is important that every person in the world be treated equally" and "He/she believes everyone should have equal opportunities in life"). Items were anchored at 1 (*not like me at all*) and 6 (*very much like me*). The scale showed acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = .65$).

Incremental theory about groups was measured using a four-item scale (see Rydell et al. 2007). The scale consisted of two general items adapted from Plaks et al. (2001; e.g., "Groups can't really change their basic characteristics," reverse scored) and more specific items that focused on the unique context of intergroup conflict (e.g., "Groups that are characterized by violent tendencies will never change their ways," reverse scored; see Halperin et al. 2011). The items were anchored at 1 (*completely disagree*) and 6 (*totally agree*). The internal reliability of the scale was $\alpha = .85$, and the four items were averaged, with higher scores indicating incremental theories about groups and lower scores indicating entity theories.

Openness to experience was measured using a forty-eight-item scale from the Neuroticism-Extroversion-Openness Personality Inventory (Costa and McCrae 1992). The scale contained six subscales: (1) fantasy—receptivity to the inner world of imagination, (2) aesthetics—appreciation of art and beauty, (3) feelings—openness to inner feelings and emotions, (4) action—openness to new experience on a practical level, (5) ideas—intellectual curiosity, and (6) values—readiness to reexamine own values and those of authority figures. The items were anchored at 1 (*not like me at all*) and 5 (*very similar to me*), and the scale yielded an internal reliability of $\alpha = .83$.

Mediating Variable—Ethos of Conflict. *Ethos of conflict* was measured using a sixteen-item scale developed by Bar-Tal and his colleagues (2012). The scale contains two

items measuring each of the eight themes suggested by Bar-Tal (1998, 2000, 2007). For example, the two items measuring societal beliefs about the justness of own goals are “the fact that an Arab population was living in the land of Israel at the time of the Jews’ return attests to the Palestinians’ right to establish their homeland there too (reversed)” and “the exclusive right of Jews to the Land of Israel stems from its status as their historical homeland.” The items anchored at 1 (*completely disagree*) and 5 (*totally agree*), and the scale yielded an internal reliability of $\alpha = .81$.

Dependent Variables—Information Processing. The Decision Board Platform makes it possible to assess a large number of measures, capturing different aspects of information processing. For the purpose of the current study, we used two of these measures.

The *general amount of information processed* was assessed using two measurements obtained from the board; the overall number of cells entered⁴ and the overall number of themes viewed by each subject. Participants had, in total, four possible themes to assess and twenty possible cells to view during the exercise. While some did not view any cells at all (i.e., they did not acquire any new information) indicating that no themes were examined, others viewed some of the cells more than once, but varied on the number of themes they viewed. As this variable is composed of two measurements, we transformed the variable indicating the number of cells into a new scale ranging from zero to four and subsequently computed our target variable by adding this score to the number of themes viewed, forming a new variable ranging from zero to eight. This measure provides an indication of both the amount of information processed and its diversity. The combination of the two measurements represents an accurate assessment of the subjects’ general processing tendencies.⁵

Selective information processing was assessed according to the type of information acquired by the subjects during the computerized procedure. The decision matrix consisted of five alternatives out of which two favored accepting the proposal (alternatives 1 and 2) and three were against it (alternatives 3, 4, and 5). Thus, in order to formulate our measure, we counted the number of cells viewed by each participant according to the alternative under which they appeared. However, because the number of “in favor” and “against” cells was not balanced (i.e., eight “in favor” cells and twelve “against” cells), we divided the number of “in favor” cells by eight, and the number of “against” cells by twelve to standardize our measurement. We then deducted the number of “in favor” cells viewed from the number of “against” cells viewed. The resulting variable that we used throughout the analysis implies both the direction of the bias and its intensity. With respect to direction, a positive number represents biased information processing, namely reflecting the examination of more cells favoring the proposal. A negative number represents biased information processing, namely examining more cells against the proposal. With respect to intensity, a higher value represents more bias favoring the proposal, while lower values represent biased inclinations against the proposal. Zero represents a balanced view of cells in favor and against accepting the proposal.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

We first present descriptive statistics on the main research variables. The mean score for ethos of conflict was 2.98 ($SD = .52$), with scores ranging from 1.56 to 4.44. Our two outcome variables provide a strong sense of the nature of the sample's processing tendencies. The mean score of the general amount of information processed was 5.28 ($SD = 2.67$), with twenty-six subjects (12.6 percent of the sample) scoring zero, and forty-six subjects scoring the highest processing score, eight. The negative skewness of the sample indicates high processing tendencies of recipients. Almost 45 percent of the sample had one of the two highest processing scores (i.e., seven or eight) suggesting that surprisingly people were highly motivated to acquire new information during the Decision Board exercise. The mean score of selective processing was .26 ($SD = .43$). The positive mean score indicates participants' general tendency to process more information favoring the proposal than information opposing it.

Next, we examined the correlations among all variables in our model as well as the sociodemographic variables (see Table 1). Our goal at this stage was to simplify our model, and we thus sought to examine which of the general worldviews is significantly correlated with either the dependent variables (i.e., the two processing variables) or the potential mediator (i.e., ethos of conflict), while controlling for sociodemographic variables.⁶

In terms of general worldviews that promote closed-mindedness, we found that three of them (i.e., RWA, SDO, and traditional values) significantly correlated with the ethos of conflict in the anticipated direction. Additionally the three general worldviews that promote open-mindedness significantly correlated with the ethos of conflict in the anticipated direction as well. Furthermore, traditional values, universal values, and incremental theories were correlated with our general processing variable, while RWA was correlated with the selective processing variable. Surprisingly, contrary to our original hypothesis, universal values negatively correlated with the general processing variable, meaning that the more participants adhere to universal values, the less information they process in general. This could indicate that people high on universal values are more prone to accepting the proposal as "peacemaking" can be seen as an important component of their value system. As a result, they might need less information when making such decisions. Finally, we found that both processing variables were positively correlated with each other and negatively correlated with ethos of conflict.

General Worldviews, Ethos of Conflict, and Information Processing

In light of the above, we first regressed the information processing variables on the the ethos of conflict variable, while controlling for sociodemographic variables. while controlling for sociodemographic variables. Results indicate that ethos of conflict significantly predicted the general amount of information processed, $\beta = -.13$,

Table 1. Bivariate Correlations among the Study Variables.

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. General processing	5.28 (2.67)	1										
2. Selective processing	.26 (.43)	.20***	1									
3. Ethos of conflict	2.98 (.52)	-.12*	-.25***	1								
4. RWA	2.94 (.57)	-.02	-.16**	.56***	1							
5. SDO	2.73 (.89)	.08	-.09	.20***	.30***	1						
6. Traditional values	2.51 (.86)	-.18**	-.10	.31***	.40***	-.05	1					
7. Conformist values	4.17 (.95)	.01	-.03	.11	.19***	-.00	.27***	1				
8. Universal values	4.53 (.84)	-.13*	.08	-.18***	-.20***	-.49***	.16**	.13**	1			
9. Incremental theory	3.46 (1.11)	.11*	.02	-.44***	-.31***	-.14**	-.16**	-.12*	.11	1		
10. Openness	3.52 (.36)	.02	.05	-.19***	-.33***	-.20***	-.15**	-.18***	.37***	.12	1	
11. Age	23.64 (2.3)	.09	-.00	-.02	.08	.02	-.04	.03	-.08	.04	-.09	1

Note: RWA = right-wing authoritarianism; SDO = social dominance orientation.

*Correlation is significant at the .1 level (two-tailed). **Correlation is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed). ***Correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

Table 2. Effects of General Worldviews on Ethos of Conflict.

	Ethos of conflict	
	β	<i>T</i>
Traditional values	.12	2.01*
Conformist values	-.01	-.26
Universal values	-.08	-1.17
Incremental theory	-.28	-4.78**
RWA	.42	6.17**
SDO	.00	.08
Openness	.02	.38
Age	-.04	-.68
Gender	-.00	-.14

Note: RWA = right-wing authoritarianism, SDO = social dominance orientation. $R^2 = .44$, adjusted $R^2 = .40$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

$p = .05$, and also significantly predicted selective information processing, $\beta = -.26$, $p < .001$, indicating a relationship between ethos of conflict and processing tendencies of information related to the conflict.

As stated, the results of the preliminary analysis revealed that almost all of the measured worldviews significantly correlated with ethos of conflict. Therefore, at this stage, we wanted to specifically examine each worldview's association with adherence to the ethos of conflict while controlling for the other worldviews and for the sociodemographic variables. We hypothesized that some of the general worldviews would become non-significant in a regression analysis, indicating that those that remained associated with the ethos of conflict are stronger predictors. Thus, we entered the ethos of conflict in a simple regression analysis with all measured general worldviews, while controlling for sociodemographic variables. The results of this analysis (see Table 2) revealed that two general worldviews promoting closed-mindedness (i.e., RWA and traditional values) and one general worldview promoting open-mindedness (i.e., incremental theory) are effective predictors of adherence to ethos of conflict ethos. That is, the higher the participants were on RWA and traditional values, the higher their adherence to the ethos of conflict, and the more they believed groups are malleable and can change, the lower their adherence to the ethos of conflict.

Next, we wanted to examine the relationship of the two information processing variables with general worldviews and the ethos of conflict. Thus we entered each of the information processing variables to a simple regression analysis with the general world views, while controlling for sociodemographic variables. Results indicate that only traditional values were found to be associated with the general amount of information processed ($\beta = -.18$, $p = .02$), while none of the general worldviews were found to be associated with the selective processing variable. This indicates that only traditional values have a

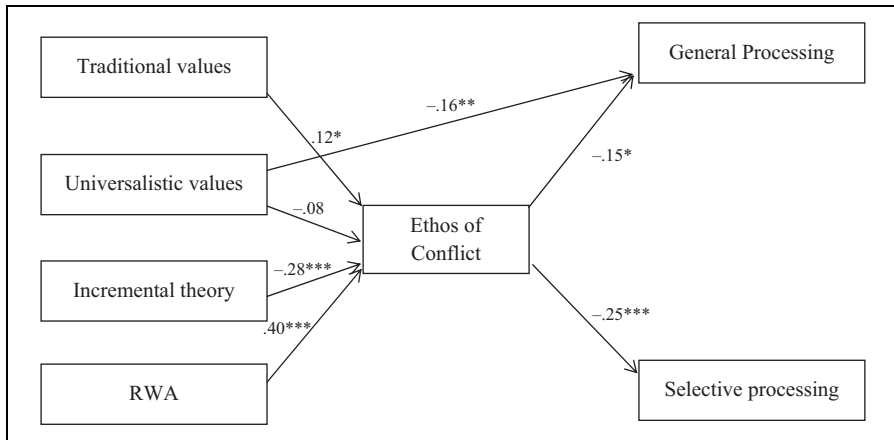


Figure 2. Structural equation modeling for predicting information processing.

direct link to processing tendencies that is not mediated through ethos of conflict.

Examining the General Research Model

To test our hypothesized model, in which ethos of conflict mediates the effect of the general worldviews on the processing tendencies of information related to a new peace proposal, we used structural equation modeling with latent variables, using version 7.0 of the AMOS program. RWA, traditional values, universal values, and incremental theory, all found in the preliminary analysis to be significantly correlated with one of the dependent variables, were specified as exogenous in the model. Ethos of conflict was specified as the mediator, and the processing variables were specified as the endogenous outcome variables. Since neither the sociodemographic variables nor the remaining general worldviews (i.e., conformist values, SDO, and openness) were found to be correlated with the two processing variables, we omitted them from the model. Furthermore, to simplify the presentation, we omitted the correlations among the general worldviews, but these were taken into account in the analysis and can be found in the correlation matrix provided in Table 1.

Our hypothesized model showed good fit to the data, $\chi^2(7) = 10.07, p = .18, ns$; Normed Fit Index = .95, Comparative Fit Index = .98, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation = .04. Standardized parameter estimates are presented in Figure 2. Two of the general worldviews (i.e., traditional values and RWA) were positively associated with levels of ethos of conflict, while the remaining two (i.e., universal values and incremental theory) were negatively associated with it. However, the direct association between universalism and the ethos was no longer significant. Ethos of conflict, in turn, predicted the general amount of information processed

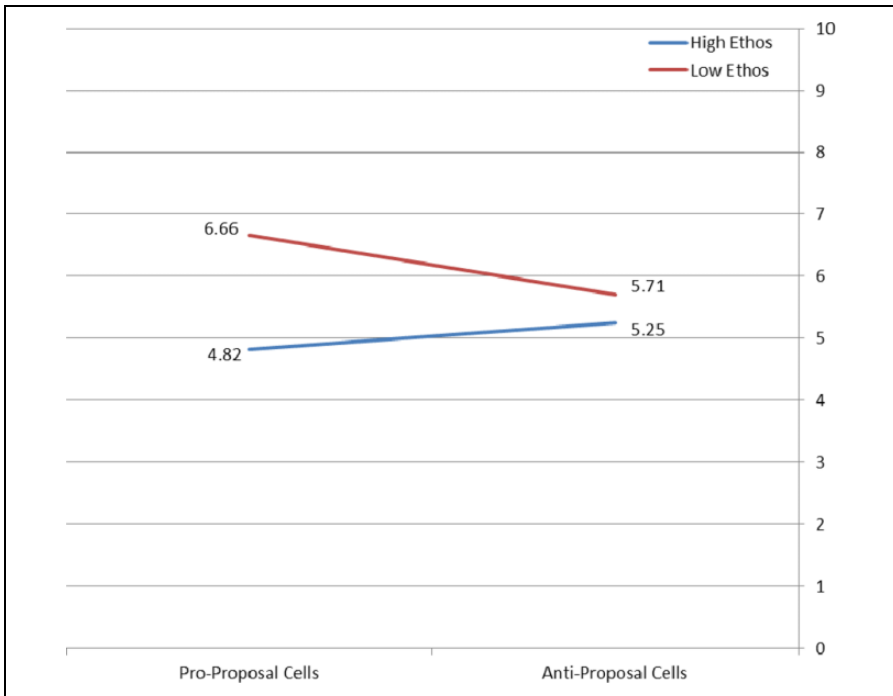


Figure 3. Processing tendencies of recipients according to high versus low ethos of conflict.

($\beta = -.15, p < .05$) as well as selective processing ($\beta = -.25, p < .00$). Importantly, all of the general worldviews were associated with the information processing variables only indirectly through the ethos of conflict, with the exception of universal values that were directly associated with the general amount of information processed ($\beta = -.16, p < .05$).⁷

The results suggest that the ethos of conflict indeed effects the way people process information within the context of conflict. Finally, we wished to take a more in-depth look at precisely this effect. Specifically, we wanted to examine whether this effect was symmetrical in the sense that participants with lower levels of ethos would be more inclined to view more information favoring the proposal, while participants with higher levels of ethos would tend to acquire more information rejecting the proposal.

For this purpose, we divided our sample into two groups, high versus low ethos of conflict, according to the median score of the scale ($M = 3$). We then ran a repeated measured analysis of variance, with cell types (pro-proposal and anti-proposal) as the within-subject factor, and high versus low ethos of conflict as the between-subject factor. The ethos \times type of cells interaction was found to be significant,

$F(1, 205) = 5.45, p = .02$, such that participants did not significantly differ on the number of anti-proposal cells they viewed (low ethos: $M = 5.71, SD = 5.41$; high ethos: $M = 5.25, SD = 5.16$) but did significantly differ on the number of pro-proposal cells they viewed (low ethos: $M = 6.66, SD = 4.37$; high ethos: $M = 4.82, SD = 3.58$; see Figure 3).

In a further analysis, we entered both pro-proposal and anti-proposal cells to a simple regression analysis with the continuous measurement of the ethos of conflict, while controlling for all sociodemographic variables. Results clearly showed that while the ethos of conflict was significantly associated with the number of cells viewed within the pro-proposal alternatives ($\beta = -.211, t = -3.09, p = .002$), it was not associated with the same variable for anti-proposal alternatives.

These findings provide a clearer indication as to how the ethos of conflict biases the processing of new information. Specifically, they indicate that the ethos of conflict operates asymmetrically in the sense that it leads people to acquire less information favoring the peace proposal, while having no effect on the acquisition of information against the proposal. This finding strongly supports the notion that the ethos of conflict is a rigid ideology that leads to a one-way bias in the processing of information. That is, ethos only affects the processing of possibly positive information that at times might hold the key to a better future.

Discussion

The present study raises one of the core questions in the research of sociopsychological barriers to peaceful conflict resolution: what is the nature of these barriers, and, even more importantly, how do they function? To respond to these questions, we focused in this study on two types of sociopsychological barriers—*general world views* and *ethos of conflict*—and demonstrated how they function to eventually obstruct support for the peaceful resolution of the conflict.

In the most general contribution, the study found that ethos of conflict mediates the effect of general worldviews on the tendencies to process information related to new peace proposals. That is, on one end of the equation stand *general worldviews* on values, the nature of groups, social system, and intergroup relation, which are not directly related to the conflict. Next, as mediating factors appear the societal beliefs of the *ethos of conflict*, which together act as a conflict-supporting ideology. Finally, at the other end of the equation appear indicators that show how information is processed. The indicators show that *sociopsychological barriers to conflict resolution serve to obstruct the search for alternative information that may shed new light on the peace making process*. Influenced by the previously mentioned sociopsychological dynamics, individuals avoid examining information that may open a new perspective on the negotiation of the peaceful settlement of the conflict.

Specifically, the final analysis of our results showed that two general worldviews that promote closed-mindedness (i.e., RWA and traditional values) were positively

associated with levels of ethos of conflict, while another general worldviews that promotes open-mindedness (i.e., incremental theory) was negatively associated with it. The ethos of conflict, in turn, led to a decrease in the general amount of information viewed by participants as well as to more selective processing. Only universal values were directly related to the information processing variables, while all other independent variables were associated with the dependent variables only indirectly, through ethos of conflict.

Focusing first on the information processing variables, we see that they indicate—a lack of openness to new information that may provide a new understanding of the conflict situation—an understanding that may lead to support for the peace process. The ideological belief system that is the ethos of conflict propagates adherence to conflict goals, delegitimization of the rival, and in general continuation of the conflict (Bar-Tal 2007). However, in order to resolve the conflict peacefully, these beliefs must be unfrozen. Information shedding new light on the rival, on the goals, on the costs of the conflict, and on the opportunities to launch peacemaking process is necessary to move forward toward conflict resolution. Such information is essential since it may lead to new outlook on the conflict and the rival (Bar-Tal and Halperin 2009). Openness in information processing—the readiness to see and to search for the new information—is thus of crucial importance.

The independent variables, *general worldviews*, are known to affect the way individuals see major issues related to intergroup relations, but in times of violent conflict they also have a major influence on the way society members view the conflict and their rival. Indeed, empirical findings support the observed relationships between RWA, traditional values, incremental theory, on one hand, and ethos of conflict as a conservative ideology on the other hand. Ethos of conflict, in turn, mediates between these variables and limited openness to information, both in general and specifically to positive information regarding the conflict's resolution. These results are not surprising if one sees ethos of conflict as a conservative ideology that serves to perpetuate the conflict so as to maintain the known and familiar without taking risks in moving into the unknown and ambiguous future that would result from peacemaking. The ethos leads to a focus on potential threats and losses in moving toward compromises with the rival and an emphasis on the stability and security offered by the present situation (Hogg 2005; Jost et al. 2003).

Of special interest in this study was a finding indicating an asymmetry in the way levels of adherence to ethos of conflict function. While participants high in adherence to the ethos differed from those low in adherence with regard to openness to information supporting the peace process, the former did not differ from the latter in their search for information opposing this process. In other words, individuals identified as strongly supporting the societal beliefs of the ethos of conflict were in general more closed to new information: not only did they avoid information opposing their view, they made very little effort to search for information supporting their view. If we accept the view that ethos of conflict reflects conservative ideology, this finding is

in line with the conception suggesting that conservatism is strongly related to a high need for closure (Jost et al. 2003). High need for closure refers to the desire to maintain firm and rigid knowledge on a given topic and hold on to a clear opinion, without searching for additional information that may cause ambiguity and uncertainty (Kruglanski 1989; Kruglanski and Webster 1996). Indeed, a number of studies have found clear relationship between conservative ideology and need for closure (Chirumbolo 2002; Golec de Zavala and Van Bergh 2007; Kossowska and van Hiel 2003; van Hiel, Pandelaere, and Duriez 2004). Thus, our study provides additional behavioral evidence to the accumulated attitudinal findings about this relationship.

The current study has important implications, both theoretical and applied. Theoretically, it validates major aspects of the general integrative framework of sociopsychological barriers suggested by Bar-Tal and Halperin (2011). Specifically, we focused on the long-term enduring features of the model that were hypothesized to lead to selective, biased, and distorted information processing. From an applied perspective, we see close-mindedness as a crucial feature of conflict deterioration and stagnation. Indeed, any process of conflict resolution must begin with societies' willingness to question their long-held beliefs regarding the eruption, continuation, and maintenance of the conflict. Furthermore, peacemaking consists of considering new ideas and proposals to end the conflict. All of these necessitate openness to new information that may contradict previously held beliefs regarding the conflict and the adversary. Thus, it is crucial to point specifically to those views that feed into the conflict ideology and close societies to new information that may shed positive light on conflict resolution.

Nonetheless, pointing to the specific beliefs and views that may obstruct conflict resolution is only the beginning. Future research should focus on the mechanisms and methods that can help societies overcome these sociopsychological barriers. Indeed, previous studies manipulated a number of the general worldviews suggested in the current framework. For example, the study by Halperin and colleagues (2011) manipulated people's beliefs regarding the malleability of groups and showed that leading people to believe that groups can change leads them to hold more positive attitudes toward the out-group and increases their willingness to compromise for peace. In this vein, it would be interesting to see whether such manipulations would also have a positive effect on the willingness to process new positive information relating to conflict more fully and evenly of.

Finally, it is important to stipulate that a major limitation of the current study is its correlative design, in which causality can only be inferred. However, because our dependent variables were behavioral, we can assume that they were indeed a result of the aforementioned barriers. Furthermore, the theoretical rationale presented is strongly in line with this causal assumption. In sum, the present study succeeds in illuminating the behavioral functioning of the sociopsychological barriers to conflict resolution. These barriers prevent exposure to and search for information that could potentially lead to the unfreezing of the conflict-supporting beliefs. It is the unfreezing of these beliefs that could open a way to the consideration of

compromises with the rival for the sake of reaching a peaceful resolution to the conflict. However, as the study demonstrated, individuals with high levels of the conservative ethos of conflict are less open to alternative information, preferring instead to adhere to the ethos' societal beliefs. The challenge that social scientists have is to find ways how to overcome these sociopsychological barriers, so as to encourage society members involved in vicious violent conflicts to consider their termination in a peaceful way.

Appendix

The Full Proposal Presented to Participants

During the last round of negotiations between Palestinian President Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, mediated by US President Obama, Abbas presented a new peace proposal that is composed of two phases.

In the first phase, a Midterm Agreement will be signed within a three-month period. The agreement will include:

1. Proclamation of the Palestinian state;
2. Acknowledgment of Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people;
3. An obligation to end all violence;
4. Removal of Jewish settlements east of the security barrier;
5. Full Israeli Defense Forces control over the Jordan Valley;
6. East Jerusalem will be controlled by the Palestinian State.

Following the signing of the Midterm Agreement, the parties will have two years to negotiate the following issues:

1. Determining the final border, with the option of land swaps (on a 1:1 basis) in return for Israeli annexation of the settlement blocks;
2. Determining the security arrangements for the next 100 years, arrangements that will be subjected to US supervision;
3. Determining the status of the holy sites and particularly the Holy Basin;
4. Reaching a fair and agreed settlement with regard to the status of both the Palestinian and the Jewish refugees.

Should the parties will not reach an agreement within the two-year time frame, they will be obliged to accept a US bridging proposal.

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Notes

1. Ethos of conflict is defined as the configuration of shared central conflict-supporting societal beliefs that provide a particular dominant orientation to a society in the present and for the future (Bar-Tal 2000). It is composed of eight major themes about issues related to the conflict, the in-group, and the adversary: (1) *societal beliefs about the justness of one's own goals*, which outline the contested goals, indicate their *crucial importance*, and provide their explanations and rationales; (2) *societal beliefs about security* stress the importance of personal safety and *national survival*, and outline the conditions for their achievement; (3) *societal beliefs of positive collective self-image* concern the ethnocentric tendency to *attribute positive traits, values, and behavior* to one's own society; (4) *societal beliefs of victimization* concern the *self-presentation of the in-group as the victim of the conflict*; (5) *societal beliefs of delegitimizing the opponent concern beliefs that deny the adversary's humanity*; (6) *societal beliefs of patriotism* generate attachment to the country and society, by *propagating loyalty, love, care, and sacrifice*; (7) *societal beliefs of unity* refer to the importance of ignoring internal conflicts and disagreements during intractable conflicts to unite *the society's forces in the face of an external threat*; and finally, (8) *societal beliefs of peace* refer to peace as the ultimate desire of the society (Bar-Tal 2000, 2007; Rouhana and Bar-Tal 1998).
2. While the proposal was fiction, it was based upon ideas suggested in negotiations at the time. Participants were debriefed after the procedure that the proposal was not real.
3. Upon facing technical difficulties, participants were assisted by the research team present in the classroom.
4. It is important to clarify that every "entry" to a cell was counted, even in cases where the cell was entered twice or more. However, we did decide to omit an entry when the cell was viewed more than once sequentially. This is because experience shows us that sometimes it takes the cells a few seconds to open up, which may lead participants to click the cell again, opening the cell twice. Thus, we assume that a sequential entry to the same cell indicates an accidental mouse click.
5. We conducted a preliminary analysis for each of these measurements separately. As we found that both of them were highly correlated and that they were associated with the other

variables in the model in the same direction while showing the same patterns, we decided to merge them into one measure.

6. Throughout the analysis, we controlled for age and gender.
7. We also compared the fit measures of the tested model with the fit measures of an alternative model in which we reversed the causal direction between the general worldviews and the ethos of conflict. The fit measures of the alternative model, $\chi^2(6) = 39.81$, $p = .00$ ns; Normed Fit Index = .83, Comparative Fit Index = .83, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation = .16, were lower than the hypothesized model.

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