Fear of Death Amplifies Retributive Justice Motivations and Encourages Political Violence

Gilad Hirschberger
Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, Israel

Tom Pyszczynski
University of Colorado at Colorado Springs

Tsachi Ein-Dor and Tal Shani Sherman
Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, Israel

Eihab Kadah
IBDA-Kafar Manda, Israel

Pelin Kesebir and Young Chin Park
University of Colorado at Colorado Springs

Terror management research indicates that mortality salience (MS) increases support for violent solutions to conflict. The current research examines, in 4 experimental studies, whether this effect is primarily affected by rational considerations of costs of benefits, or whether a retributive justice mindset overrides a utilitarian calculus. In Study 1, justice primes increased, and utility primes decreased Palestinian citizens of Israel’s support for violence when death was salient. Study 2 replicated this effect replacing the generic death prime with a reminder of the Nakba (Palestinian catastrophe). In Studies 3 and 4, MS increased support for military reprisals when justice concerns were high and expected utility was low among both Israelis and South Koreans. These results from 3 distinct cultural samples underscore the role of existential concerns in fostering support for violent solutions to conflict because of the perceived justice of violence, even when such violent policies are low in pragmatic utility.

Keywords: intergroup conflict, retributive justice, cost-benefit utility, terror management

A decade of research has shown that existential concerns often motivate people to prefer violent solutions to political conflicts over negotiation and compromise (see Hirschberger & Pyszczynski, 2011 for a review). The current studies examine whether directing attention to retributive justice concerns may lead people to endorse violent solutions to conflict, even when such solutions clearly lack any pragmatic utility. Although previous findings that reminders of death increase support for violent solutions to international conflicts have been interpreted as driven by an increased desire to vanquish an evil enemy and restore justice (Pyszczynski et al., 2006), the role of justice concerns in these effects has not been empirically assessed, nor have the conditions that affect the balance between concerns about justice and utility. The current research set out to experimentally assess the role of justice and utility concerns in the relationship between existential threat and support for political violence in three distinct populations that are directly affected by violent intractable conflict—Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel, and South Koreans.

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Gilad Hirschberger received his PhD from Bar-Ilan University in 2002. He is currently at Baruch Ivcher School of Psychology, The Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya. His research interests include existential psychology, terror management, collective historical trauma, and political psychology.

Tom Pyszczynski received his PhD from University of Kansas in 1980. He is currently at University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. His research interests include experimental existential psychology, terror management theory, and reactions to threats and emergency situations.

Tsachi Ein-Dor received his PhD from Bar-Ilan University in 2009. He is currently at Baruch Ivcher School of Psychology, The Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya. His research interests include social defense theory, terror management theory, and reactions to threats and emergency situations.

Tal Shani Sherman received his MA from Ariel College in 2013. He is currently at Baruch Ivcher School of Psychology, The Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya. His research interests include terror management theory.

Eihab Kadah received his MA from Northeastern University in 2008. He is currently at IBDA Kafar Manda, Israel. His research interests include Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Pelin Kesebir received her PhD from University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign in 2009. She is currently at University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research interests include positive psychology, existential psychology, psychology of religion and spirituality.

Young Chin Park received her BA from University of Colorado in 2012. She is currently at University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. Her research interests include terror management theory.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Gilad Hirschberger, School of Psychology, Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, P.O. Box 167, Herzliya, Israel 46150. E-mail: ghirschberger@idc.ac.il
Two distinct motivational orientations—retributive justice and utility—have been singled out by scholars as central to the decision to employ political violence (e.g., Bueno de Mesquita, 1988). Justice is a complex multifaceted psychological construct (Jost & Kay, 2010) comprising distributive, procedural, interpersonal, retributive, and restorative justice. Although intractable intergroup conflicts involve, to some extent, concerns with all five of these types of justice, our focus here is primarily on retributive justice—the perception that one’s group has been wronged by an adversary and that retribution will restore the moral order (Darley & Pittman, 2003). Such perception of injustice at the hands of an adversary often leads people to construe their group as the forces of good fighting against the forces of evil. From a pragmatic utility perspective, on the other hand, war is waged when leaders conclude that violence is a more efficient way to achieve political goals than other available means (e.g., Bueno de Mesquita, 1988).

Ginges and Atran (2011) have recently provided support for the irrationality of reasoning regarding the use of political violence by showing that Americans’, Nigerians’, and Israeli West Bank settlers’ support for military interventions in response to strong provocations was insensitive to pragmatic considerations. They interpreted these findings as suggesting that cost-benefit analyses are largely irrelevant when violent solutions are being considered, and argued that decisions regarding political violence are typically based on deontological reasoning focused on what is morally appropriate or necessary. The studies reported here, based on a terror management theory (TMT) analysis of war and terrorism (e.g., Hirschberger & Pyszczynski, 2011; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003), view political violence as resulting when groups threaten the existential security provided by each other’s cultural worldviews and self-esteem. From this perspective, it is the symbolic meaning that is attached to concrete grievances regarding resources, territory, and mistreatment of members of one’s group that motivate people to risk their lives in battle to kill their enemies.

Terror management theory (e.g., Pyszczynski et al., 2003) posits that people are protected from the potential for anxiety that results from their awareness of the inevitability of death by an anxiety buffering system consisting of: (a) their cultural worldviews, which provide an explanation for existence, standards through which they can attain a sense of personal value, and the promise of literal or symbolic immortality to those who live up to these standards, and (b) self-esteem, which is acquired by believing in the cultural worldview and living up to its standards. Because consensual validation of worldviews and self-conceptions is needed for effective protection against anxiety, the mere existence of those with different worldviews is threatening and undermines the conviction that one’s group represents absolute values of virtualness and justice. This, in turn, leads to anger, derogation, and aggression against others who contest the moral supremacy of one’s group, especially when death is salient (for a recent review, see Kesebir & Pyszczynski, 2011).

Whereas numerous terror management studies have shown that mortality salience (MS) increases support for militancy, it would be a mischaracterization of this research to conclude that existential concerns always tip the scales toward violence. Research shows that under some conditions, the salience of personal death leads people to reduce their endorsement of intergroup violence and increases their support for diplomacy and compromise (Hirschberger & Pyszczynski, 2011). This takes place, for example, when activating prosocial moral commitments that are incompatible with violence (Kesebir & Pyszczynski, 2011), or by focusing participants attention on the potential costs of violence (Hirschberger, Pyszczynski, & Ein-Dor, 2009). This latter study suggests that although existential threat activates violent tendencies without a consideration of the costs of violence, when these costs are made explicitly clear support for violence drops.

To assess the role that justice and utility concerns play in the relationship between existential threat and support for political violence, and when existential concerns encourage or discourage violence, we conducted four experiments to test the following hypotheses: (a) reminders of existential threat increase support for political violence when people are in a justice-oriented mindset but not when they are in a utility-oriented mindset; (b) perceptions of high justification will increase support for violent retributions when mortality is salient, regardless of the expected utility of such action.

The studies testing these hypotheses were conducted within the context of two long-standing intractable conflicts: the Middle East conflict and the conflict between North and South Korea. Studies 1 and 2 assessed the moderating role of justice and utility primes on the way existential concerns affects Palestinian citizens of Israel’s support for intergroup aggression; Study 3 conducted on Israeli Jews teases apart high and low justice and utility salience and their effect on support for aggression against the Palestinians; Study 4 examined the impact of these processes on South Koreans’ support for retaliation against North Korea.

**Study 1**

Studies 1 and 2 examined justice and utility considerations as possible moderators of the relationship between MS and support for political violence. Manipulating justice and utility mindsets enabled us to assess their causal role in directing people’s responses to existential threat. Our reasoning suggests that MS would increase support for political violence when participants are in a justice-focused mindset, but not when they are in a utility-focused mindset.

Studies 1 and 2 focused on the attitudes of Palestinian citizens of Israel who typically experience a conflicted dual Israeli-Palestinian identity (Shamir & Shikaki, 2002). Because of this identity conflict, we measured their level of identification with the Palestinians and expected ingroup identification to moderate the effects of justice and utility primes such that they would be more pronounced among high ingroup (Palestinian) identifiers. Study 1 was conducted in 2011.

**Method**

**Participants.** Palestinian Muslim citizens of Israel (N = 118), 56 men and 62 women, ranging in age from 18 to 52 (Md = 23) volunteered to participate in the study. Participants were college students recruited from various colleges in the Galilee region. A Palestinian-Israeli research assistant approached participants in various locations on campus and asked them whether they would be willing to fill out a 15-min survey. Those who agreed were invited to join the research assistant to a designated room where the study took place.
Materials and procedure. Experimental sessions were run in groups of 10–15 participants. All research materials were presented in Arabic, and sessions were administered by Arab research assistants. First, participants were randomly assigned to read a paragraph describing relations between the Palestinians and Israelis that emphasized either justice or utility. In the justice condition, it was argued that in dealing with Israel, Palestinians must not compromise on what is rightfully theirs for momentary profits and must insist on justice for Palestine. In the utility condition, it was argued that in dealing with Israel, Palestinians must think pragmatically and realistically regarding how to maximize Palestinian gains without dwelling on what is right and what is just. Neither the justice nor utility prime paragraphs made any reference to violence. Following the justice or utility primes, participants were randomly assigned to either the MS or pain salience conditions. In the MS condition, participants answered the following open-ended questions: “What do you think happens to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead?” and “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you.” In the pain salience condition, participants received the same open-ended questions with references to death replaced with “severe physical pain.” Then, all participants completed a word search puzzle that served as a distraction. Next, participants completed the dependent variable, a 5-item scale assessing support for an armed struggle against Israel answered on 9-point scales ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (9) strongly agree (“Compromising with Israel is treason;” “The armed struggle against Israel should be renewed;” “The only way with Israel is violent resistance;” “Israel does not have a right to exist;” “peace with Israel is possible (R);” $M = 5.09, SD = 1.77, \alpha = .69$). Finally, participants completed a demographic sheet that assessed their identification as Palestinians on a 9-point scale ranging from (1) weakly identify to (9) strongly identify.

Results and Discussion

A regression analysis was conducted to assess the effects of MS primes (death, pain), mindset primes (justice, utility), and level of ingroup identification on support for aggression against Israel. We compared the MS (−1) with the pain (1) condition, and compared the justice (−1) with the utility (1) prime, added the standardized ingroup identification variable, and all of the two-way interactions (MS $\times$ Mindset, MS $\times$ Ingroup identification, Mindset $\times$ Ingroup identification), and the three-way interaction.

The analysis revealed a two-way interaction between MS and mindset, $\beta = -.33, t(110) = 1.99, p = .05$, Cohen’s $d = .38$, and the predicted three-way interaction, $\beta = .25, t(110) = 2.65, p = .009$; Cohen’s $d = .5$. Using Preacher, Curran, and Bauer’s (2006) technique to probe three-way interaction effects in regression analyses, wherein separate regression lines are computed, plotted, and tested for individuals 1 standard deviation (SD) above and below the mean, we found that when participants were primed with justice concerns, MS increased support for armed struggle among participants who highly identified with their ingroup (+1 SD), $\beta = .46, t(110) = 2.81, p = .006$, Cohen’s $d = .54$, but had no significant effect on low identifiers (−1 SD), $\beta = -.20, t(110) = .69, p = .5$. However, when participants were primed with utility, MS reduced support for armed struggle among participants who highly identified with their ingroup (+1 SD), $\beta = -.40, t(110) = -2.01, p = .04$, Cohen’s $d = .38$, but had no significant effect on those low on ingroup identification (−1 SD), $\beta = -.08, t(110) = -.47, p = .64$ (see Figure 1).

These results demonstrate a causal relationship between justice-oriented thinking and support for violence when death is salient. Study 1 also shows that when utility concerns are salient, MS leads people to shift their attitudes toward utility oriented decisions, and then support for violence decreases. Perhaps utility primes direct attention to the cost of violence, as in Hirschberger et al. (2009), and then it becomes a less attractive option for Palestinians—the weaker side of the conflict.

Study 2

In Study 2, we attempted to replicate and extend the findings of Study 1, but rather than using the relatively simple MS manipulation, we primed the more complex issue of the Palestinian Nakba
of 1948. The Nakba (“catastrophe” in Arabic) is the term used by Palestinians to describe the war that led to the creation of the State of Israel, the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, and the destruction of many Palestinian towns and villages. The memory of the Nakba likely involves a sense of existential threat for Palestinians, and although this prime is not identical to the MS condition used in Study 1, it enables us to examine whether the same effects emerge using a less focused, yet more ecologically valid prime. Thus, priming the Nakba when participants were in a justice mindset was expected to make the justice of the struggle against Israel salient, and increase support for violence. In contrast, priming the Nakba when participants were in a utility mindset was expected to make the cost of the conflict with Israel salient, and consequently decrease support for additional violence.

Method

Participants. Palestinian Muslim citizens of Israel (N = 180), 97 women and 83 men, ranging in age from 17 to 55 (Mdn = 24) volunteered to participate in the study. Participants were college students recruited from various college campuses in the Galilee region and were recruited using the same procedure described in Study 1.

Materials and procedure. Experimental sessions were administered in Arabic by Arab research assistants. At the beginning of the study, participants were randomly assigned to the justice or utility mindsets, as in Study 1. Then, they were randomly assigned to either a Nakba salience condition, which was modeled after the MS induction from the previous studies and replaced all references to death “the Palestinian Nakba” (“Please think about the Palestinian Nakba and jot down the thoughts you have about this historical event.” “What are the emotions that you feel when you think about the Nakba?”), or to a pain salience condition as in Study 1. Following a word-search puzzle, participants completed the same 5-item scale assessing support for armed struggle against Israel as in Study 1 (M = 5.02, SD = 1.78, α = .73). Finally, participants completed a demographic sheet that also assessed their degree of identification with the Palestinian people and were debriefed.

Results and Discussion

A regression analysis was conducted to assess the effects of Nakba primes (Nakba, pain), mindset primes (justice, utility), and ingroup identification on support for an armed struggle against Israel. We compared the Nakba (−1) with the pain (1) condition, and the justice (1) with the utility (−1) prime, added the standardized ingroup identification variable, and all two-way interactions (Nakba × Mindset, Nakba × Ingroup identification, Mindset × Ingroup identification), and the three-way interaction. This analysis revealed a main effect for justice concerns, β = .18, t(172) = 2.3, p = .02, Cohen’s d = .35, with justice concerns increasing support for violence compared with utility; a two-way interaction between the Nakba and justice primes, β = −.29, t(172) = −3.78, p < .001, Cohen’s d = .58, and the expected three-way interaction, β = .17, t(172) = −2.20, p = .03, Cohen’s d = .34. Using Preacher and colleagues’ (2006) technique for decomposing interactions, we found that when participants were primed with justice concerns, Nakba primes increased support for an armed struggle among participants who highly identified with their ingroup (+1 SD), β = .36, t(172) = 2.45, p = .015, Cohen’s d = .37, but had no effect on low identifiers (−1 SD), β = −.08, t(172) = −.54, p = .58. However, when primed with a utility mindset, Nakba primes reduced support for an armed struggle among both high (+1 SD), β = −.5, t(172) = −3.44, p = .001, Cohen’s d = .54, and low (−1 SD), β = −.32, t(172) = −2.27, p = .02, Cohen’s d = .35 ingroup identifiers.

The finding that justice and utility primes differentially affect how Palestinian participants respond to thoughts of the Nakba extends the previous finding in Study 1 that such primes moderate responses to MS. Although we cannot be sure that Nakba primes elicit thoughts of death, or perhaps just general feelings of sadness and loss (Fritsche, Jonas, & Fankhänel, 2008), our results further demonstrate that justice-oriented thinking tends to encourage aggressive responses to provocations, whereas utilitarian thinking can lead to reduced support for aggressive policies.

Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that the MS-produced increase in support for political violence is not inevitable and depends on the salience of justice and utility oriented thought. Studies 3 and 4 were designed to continue this line of research and independently manipulate perceptions of high and low justice and utility concerns as moderators of MS in affecting attitudes toward political violence. Independent manipulations of justice and utility enabled us to disambiguate the impact of these two motivations, and thus determine their affect at different levels of the other. As in Studies 1 and 2, we expected MS to increase the impact of justice concerns to the extent that people would support violent responses when justice concerns are high. The design of the current study further enabled us to predict that this effect would take place even when the pragmatic utility of violence was explicitly low.

The current study was conducted on Israeli Jewish participants around the time of Operation Pillar of Defense (November 2012)—an Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip in retaliation for Hamas missile attacks—and the study involved decisions similar to the ones facing Israelis at the time: are attacks on Gaza justified, and do they serve the purpose of reducing future attacks against Israel?

Method

Participants. A total of 356 participants completed the study, but 17 were removed because it took them over 6 standard deviations of the average time (M = 14.4, SD = 6.9) to complete the procedure, leaving us with a sample of 339 participants (141 men and 198 women) ranging in age from 18 to 76 (Mdn = 24), who participated in the study for either course credit or on a voluntary basis. Participants who received course credit were recruited through the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) human subjects pool, and those who volunteered were recruited from various locations around campus.

Materials and procedure. Participants registered for a Qualtrics-based online experiment using IDC’s research management system. First, participants completed a bogus personality inventory intended to disguise the purpose of the study. Then, they were randomly assigned to the MS or pain salience conditions as
in the previous studies, followed by a scenario describing relations with the Hamas organization in Gaza that served to manipulate perceptions of justice (i.e., whether retribution on Hamas was justified by their ongoing use of violent tactics that kill Israelis, or not justified because Hamas was showing a reluctance to escalate the conflict), and utilitarian (i.e., whether an attack would or would not reduce future Hamas violence). In the high justice condition, participants read that Hamas had just fired rockets at Israeli towns resulting in many human casualties and much destruction, and in the low justice condition, they read that the Hamas organization is signaling Israel that it is currently not interested in violent escalation.

As a check on our assumption that these descriptions of Hamas manipulate perceptions that violent reprisal is justified, we examined in a pretest whether people view violence against Hamas as more justified in the high than low justice condition. An independent sample of 40 undergraduate participants were randomly assigned to the high and low justice conditions, and then indicated on a 7-point scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7), whether “It would be justified in this situation to attack Gaza,” and “It would be justified in this situation to pursue a nonmilitary response” (R). The average of these two highly correlated items, \( r(38) = .6, p < .001, \) served as the justice score. An independent samples \( t \) test indicated that in the high justice condition, retributions were considered significantly more justified \( (M = 3.6, SD = 1.79) \) than in the low justice condition \( (M = 2.54, SD = 1.32) \) \( t(38) = 2.14, p = .04, \) Cohen’s \( d = .67 \).

In addition to manipulating justice, the scenarios also manipulated the expected utility of a violent retaliation in reducing future Hamas attacks on Israel. In the high utility condition, participants were told that the probability that an attack on Hamas would reduce future Hamas violence against Israel was over 80%, and in the low utility condition they were told that the probability of reducing Hamas violence was less than 30%. Then, participants rated five items on a 9-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (9) regarding their support for an attack against Hamas (“We must attack Hamas now as it poses a threat to Israel;” “Israel must use all of its force against Hamas, even if civilians are hurt;” “The only way to deal with Hamas is by use of force;” “Israel should resume targeted assassinations of Hamas leaders;” “Israel must restrain its response to Hamas violence to avoid conflict escalation;” R). Responses were averaged to create a total support of violence score \( (M = 5.04, SD = 1.98, \alpha = .86) \). Finally, participants completed a demographic questionnaire and were debriefed.

Results and Discussion

A three-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with MS (death, pain), justice (high, low), and utility (high, low) as the factors, and support of violence as the dependent variable revealed the expected three-way interaction, \( F(1, 331) = 4.36, p = .038, \eta^2_p = .013 \) (see Figure 2).\(^1\) Tests for simple main effects with Bonferroni adjustment indicated that MS increased support for an attack on Hamas when justice concerns were high, even if the expected utility of the attack was low, \( F(1, 331) = 4.09, p = .044, \eta^2_p = .012 \). These findings support our contention and reveal the dominance of the retributive justice motivation over rational cost-benefit considerations when death is salient. Similarly, in the MS condition, there was higher support for an attack when it was deemed justified than when it was not deemed justified, even if the expected utility was low in both cases, \( F(1, 331) = 8.89, p = .003, \eta^2_p = .026 \). This effect was not found in the control condition, \( F(1, 331) = .02, p = .89 \). When justice concerns were low, however, utility played a significant role such that high utility increased support for an attack over low expected utility, but only in the MS condition, \( F(1, 331) = 5.38, p = .02, \eta^2_p = .016, \) and not in the control condition, \( F(1, 331) = .001, p = .99 \). Importantly, MS did not increase support of reprisals when justice was low, and utility was high, \( F(1, 331) = 1.57, p = .21, \) indicating that MS only had a significant effect on justice motivations, and not on utility considerations.

Study 3 adds to our understanding of retributive justice motivations by showing that not only do justice motivations promote intergroup violence when death is salient, but that this occurs even when the cost-benefit utility of such action is explicitly low. Unlike the findings of studies 1 and 2, however, in the current research utility, manipulations did not decrease support for violence when death was salient. In fact, in the MS condition when justice concerns were low, manipulation of high utility increased support for retaliation over low utility, indicating that when justice concerns are low cost-benefit considerations are important. We believe that the power differential between Israel and the Palestinians may explain this discrepancy in the effects of utility. For the weaker group, utility considerations usually mean considering their losses in a battle with a powerful adversary, whereas for the stronger group, utility could also connote practical gains.

**Study 4**

Study 4 replicated Study 3 in South Korea in December 2012, against the backdrop of a North Korean attack on South Korea’s Yeonpyeong Island, which resulted in casualties. The design of this study is slightly different from Study 3 in that we decided to treat justice and utility as within-participant variables. Thus, we employed a 2 (high vs. low justification: within participants factor) × (high vs. low utility: within participants factor) × (MS vs. control: between participants factor) mixed design.

**Method**

**Participants.** Ninety-six South Koreans living in South Korea participated in an online study. Of the original 96 participants, six responded with either all 1’s or all 9’s to questions across all four scenarios, and were thus excluded from the final data analysis (remaining participants included 56 men, 29 women, and 5 participants who did not report gender), as is often recommended in online research (see Gosling & Johnson, 2010). Participants were recruited through e-mails sent out to employees at the offices of a large automobile manufacturer and several Korean universities; they were offered the chance to be included in a raffle with a 1 in 4 chance of winning electronics gift cards worth approximately 55 US, as an incentive for their participation. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 76 \( (M = 37.43; SD = 13.94) \).

\(^1\) Cell means and standard deviations are available from the authors upon request.
Materials and procedure. All study materials were in Korean. Participants were told that the study examines personality characteristics and political attitudes. After giving informed consent, participants completed a bogus personality scale, and were then exposed to either the MS or pain control condition used in the previous studies, followed by a word search puzzle that served as a delay. In the high justification condition, participants read about a situation in which North Korea’s attack resulted in physical damage and casualties, whereas the low justification condition involved no casualties but minor physical damage. The high utility condition featured military intelligence analysts claiming that immediate military retaliation would stop further attacks from North Korea. In the low utility scenario, military analysts argued that a retaliatory attack by South Korea would not have any effect on North Korea’s future behavior. Participants read the four scenarios in randomized order.

After each scenario, participants answered two questions that were averaged to create the support for retribution against North Korea dependent measure (M = 5.53–6.19; SD = 1.75–1.8; r values ranged between .74–.84, p < .001). These items were “South Korea should take retaliatory military action against North Korea,” and “How should South Korea deal with the North Korean attack?” Items were answered on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from (1) definitely no and no retaliation to (9) definitely yes and full scale war. Finally, participants provided demographic information and were debriefed.

Results and Discussion

A 2 (Justification: high vs. low) × 2 (Utility: high vs. low) × 2 (MS vs. control) mixed ANOVA was conducted to examine the relationship of MS (between-subjects factor), justice concerns (within-subjects factor), and utility concerns (within-subjects factor) on support for military retaliation. Both the justice and utility manipulations yielded significant main effects. Participants displayed higher support for retaliatory military action against North Korea when there was greater damage inflicted upon South Korea and hence greater justification for retaliation, F(1, 84) = 40.33, p < .001, ηp² = .32; and they were also more supportive of military retaliation when such an act was presented as high in utility, F(1, 84) = 5.9, p = .017, ηp² = .07. The analysis also revealed significant two-way interactions between Justice × Utility, F(1, 84) = 5.12, p = .026, ηp² = .06, and Justice × MS, F(1, 84) = 5.40, p = .023, ηp² = .06.

These effects were qualified by the predicted three-way interaction, F(1, 84) = 3.79, p = .055, ηp² = .04 (see Figure 3). To determine the source of this three-way interaction, we conducted a simple effects test, which revealed a simple interaction between justice and utility concerns only in the MS condition, F(1, 34) = 4.08, p = .051, ηp² = .11, and not in the control condition, F(1, 50) = .14, p = .71.

Our analyses in the MS condition revealed a significant effect of justice concerns, F(1, 34) = 24.99, p < .001, ηp² = .42, but no effect of utility concerns, F(1, 34) = .72, p = .40. To probe the significant interaction, tests for simple main effects in the MS condition with Bonferroni adjustment revealed that high justification led to more support for an attack than low justification regardless of whether the utility of such an attack was high, F(1, 34) = 5.12, p = .03, ηp² = .13, or low, F(1, 34) = 22.84, p < .001, ηp² = .4. Similar to Study 3, high utility played a significant role only when justice concerns were low, and in that case, it increased support for retaliation compared with the low utility condition, F(1, 34) = 5.03, p = .03, ηp² = .13. When justice concerns were high, however, utility did not play any significant role, F(1, 34) = 0.59, p = .45.

The results of Study 4 replicate the main result of Study 3 in a culturally different sample and indicate that in the MS condition support for violent reprisal is high when perceived justice is high, even when expected utility is low. It is remarkable that in spite of the vast differences in culture and in the nature of intergroup conflict, the effects of MS and justice manipulations on support of intergroup violence were almost identical among both Israelis and South Koreans (see Figures 2 and 3).
benefit analyses (e.g., Ginges & Atran, 2011). Fighting for justice considerations of right, wrong, good, and bad trump rational cost-benefit analyses particularly appealing possibly because considerations of costs and benefits carry less weight. At the same time, our results indicate that cost-benefit utility considerations may also determine the direction of MS effects. Specifically, MS decreased support for violence when Palestinian participants were primed with a utility mindset (Studies 1 and 2), but among Israeli Jews and South Koreans, higher expected utility increased support for violence in the MS condition compared with low utility, but only when justice concerns were low. When justice concerns were high and mortality was salient, utilitarian considerations were inconsequential. These results seem to suggest that high utility carries a different meaning in different contexts. The difference in the effects of utility considerations on Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish samples may reflect the power differential between these groups, such that for the weaker side of the conflict utility concerns highlight the costs of conflict, whereas for the stronger side utility may convey certain gains and benefits. Specifically, it seems that for Israelis and South Koreans utility concerns increase support for violence, but only when such violence is hard to justify and mortality is salient. Future research should continue to examine the role of asymmetric power, as well as possible cross-cultural differences in utility considerations on intergroup conflict.

The present findings suggest that, when thinking about possible violent responses to intergroup conflicts, justice-based or deontological reasoning are particularly appealing possibly because considerations of right, wrong, good, and bad trump rational cost-benefit analyses (e.g., Ginges & Atran, 2011). Fighting for justice and vanquishing evil amplify the moral differences between us and them, and bolsters the belief that conflict with another group is not just a selfish quarrel over material resources, but an epic battle of good versus evil. In this state of mind, it is no wonder that practical considerations of costs and benefits carry less weight.

At the same time, our results indicate that cost-benefit utility considerations may also determine the direction of MS effects. Specifically, MS decreased support for violence when Palestinian participants were primed with a utility mindset (Studies 1 and 2), but among Israeli Jews and South Koreans, higher expected utility increased support for violence in the MS condition compared with low utility, but only when justice concerns were low. When justice concerns were high and mortality was salient, utilitarian considerations were inconsequential. These results seem to suggest that high utility carries a different meaning in different contexts. The difference in the effects of utility considerations on Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish samples may reflect the power differential between these groups, such that for the weaker side of the conflict utility concerns highlight the costs of conflict, whereas for the stronger side utility may convey certain gains and benefits. Specifically, it seems that for Israelis and South Koreans utility concerns increase support for violence, but only when such violence is hard to justify and mortality is salient. Future research should continue to examine the role of asymmetric power, as well as possible cross-cultural differences in utility considerations on intergroup conflict.

The findings of the current research suggest that the rhetoric of ingroup moral justification is a catalyst of intergroup violence in conflicts ranging from the Middle East to the Far East, especially when existential threats are salient, as they often are in protracted violent conflicts. Absolutist conceptions of justice can be viewed as antithetical to peace because peace requires recognition of the claims of the other side, realistic assessment of possibilities, and acceptance of painful compromises that often involve relinquishing desires for vengeful justice. When people hold strong convictions about the justice of their group’s position, they perceive the conflict in zero-sum terms, are less likely to support compromise with adversaries, and are more likely to believe that violence is an inevitable solution (Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011).

In this research spanning four studies and three distinct cultures, we argue that when existential issues are at stake, there is danger that conflict will stray from a normative, rational process wherein costs and benefits are carefully considered and will revert to an epic battle of good over evil that often defies logic and places the lives of millions at peril, even when the chances of success are abysmal. This research identifies the combination of the desire for retributive justice and existential threat as a key motivator of
intergroup violence even when the expected utility of such violence is low. Results shed experimental light on real-life eruptions of violent conflict and provide a new avenue for understanding the processes that lead to the preference for violent solutions to political problems—even when these solutions make little practical sense.

References


