

ESSAY

When Inter-Group Conflict Becomes War

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In the fall of 2023, the Hamas-Israel war pushed the Russia-Ukraine war off front-page news, though it was unclear which actions in Gaza and Israel constituted war or terrorism. As British intellectual and diplomat Peter Ustinov quipped on German television at the outset of the post-9/11 Iraq war, “terrorism is the war of the poor, and war is the terrorism of the rich.” But every war is the ultimate inter-group conflict between the in-group and the out-group, between “us” and “them,” and meso-sociological social psychology offers useful research findings that at least partially explain its social dynamics.

One of the first questions in every inter-group conflict is which side and what factors initiated it. In the case of Hamas versus Israel, was it the horrific violence perpetrated by Hamas against Israelis on October 7? Or was it the preceding gradual confinement by Israel of Palestinians to by now 13% of their original land, and cutting off their supply of water and electricity? Was it the multiple Arab-Israeli wars of the past 75 years? Was it the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, or the lead-up 1947 UN Partition Plan which prompted the expulsion of most of Palestine’s predominantly Arab population? Going even further back in history, was it the nineteenth century rise of Zionism in Europe, or even the centuries of antisemitism that eventually peaked in the Nazi Holocaust?

After initiation of inter-group conflict, as impossible as it is to ascertain in the Hamas-Israel case, who is responsible for retaliation and escalation? As 8-year-olds reason, “If you hit me once, I get to hit you twice; once to get even, and again to punish you for starting it.” Yet even without external provocation by the out-group, processes internal to the in-group can cause conflict to persist and escalate. For one, stereotypes progressively exaggerate group differences, making the out-group seem more alien to the in-group than they really are. More specifically, the cognitive framework the in-group holds of the out-group is simplified: “they” are clear, “we” are complex. The homogeneity of the out-group is exaggerated: “they” are uniform, “we” are diverse. And the stereotype of the out-group is extreme: “they” are all equivalent to their radical fringe.

But not all Palestinians agree with the October 7 actions taken by Hamas, and not all Israelis agree with the subsequent actions taken by the state of Israel. Not all actions taken by

any one actor belonging to a social category fully represent that whole category. Condemning inhumane actions taken by Hamas is not categorically Islamophobic, just as condemning anti-humanitarian actions taken by the state of Israel is not categorically antisemitic.

Then there's the problem of attributional bias, which is the tendency for observers to overestimate the role of internal actor characteristics in causing behavior, and to underestimate the role of external situational factors. When applied to groups, attributional bias is the tendency of in-group members to make internal actor attributions for negative out-group behavior—"they" behaved negatively because that is their disposition. Conversely, in-group members tend to make external situational attributions for positive out-group behavior—"they" behaved positively because their circumstances coerced them to do so. The in-group simply discredits positive behavior as uncharacteristic of "them," and thereby effectively explains away any positive out-group behavior as merely circumstantial. When "they" do bad, it's because that's who they are; when "they" do good, it's because they had no choice.

Then add to this scenario the probable expansion of incendiary disputes from specific accusations to general injustices as latent issues and long-standing grievances come to the fore. When a long-awaited opportunity to settle accounts—to get even—presents itself, inter-group conflict becomes that much more intense and intractable. For example, the current Hamas-Israel conflict is obviously about so much more than October 7. Furthermore, there is a strong likelihood that, as one group punishes the other, the character of those punitive actions themselves becomes an additional grievance, quite apart from and beyond whatever the already existing underlying issues were. And needless to say, any remotely constructive communication between the two groups breaks down and disappears.

Meanwhile, in-group cohesion increases. Group leaders have long known that the best way to unite a group is to identify a common enemy, and thereby magnify in-group identity. Yet internal leadership rivalry also grows, with challengers likely to be more militant than the leaders in place, thereby motivating the leaders holding power to become likewise more militant so as to retain their position of power. At the same time, as all members shift into crisis mode, internal pressure to conform increases and tolerance of internal dissent decreases. Individual rights and/or liberties are consensually curtailed, as standards of internal equity or fairness are modified in the interests of advancing group benefits over individual benefits.

What can possibly mitigate inter-group conflict? Methods of reducing such strife include the possibility that increased interpersonal contact between individuals from different social categories—more specifically from groups in conflict—will moderate their mutually hostile stereotypes and attitudes. A deep subjective realization of mutual humanity can indeed build authentic peace effectively. But as de-segregating schools in the American south demonstrated,

that only works in conditions of equal group status, personal and enduring contact, and cooperative versus competitive reward structures.

Another possibility is the identification and pursuit of super-ordinate goals, those objectives sought by both groups in a conflict that cannot be achieved by either side alone. Such goals restructure inter-group relationships from a win-lose, zero-sum reward structure to an either win-win or lose-lose structure, rendering group boundaries irrelevant. But such goals are ineffective when one side would rather kill or be killed than live well in peace.

A third method of conflict reduction is unilateral conciliatory initiatives, the tit-for-tat strategy of one group one-sidedly initiating de-escalatory steps in hopes that the other will reciprocate. This of course is risky, because the opposing group may react with distrust, demand total capitulation, or seize the opportunity to destroy the initiating group. But it is credited with bringing the Cold War to an end in the 1980s.

However, the most effective method of reducing inter-group conflict is to meld multiple social categories into one, effectively de-categorizing ourselves. As cognitively dependent as we are on categories—every word is a category—we, for example, are all children of parents, and possibly parents of children, about whom we care deeply. More profoundly, we are all children of God bearing the *imago Dei*. We humans are “we,” not “us” and “them.” We are more similar than different. We are all kin, one of a kind, called to kind-ness. “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Therefore, to de-activate our uniquely human capacity for empathetic love of neighbor is to de-humanize ourselves, not just the “other.” Inter-group conflict is best moderated or avoided altogether by recognizing and honoring our super-ordinate human identity.

Here in North America, the culture wars rage ever more fiercely on every front, generating progressively real possibilities of outright civil war, as both information and entertainment media now acknowledge. Understanding the social dynamics of inter-group conflict and the possible paths to its reduction, even if not resolution, is as urgent “here” as “there.”

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