

# Belief that others can change could be a powerful tool in Israeli-Palestinian conflict

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Israelis and Palestinians have been locked in a bloody cycle of reciprocal retaliation for so long, it can be difficult to imagine the region without its tragic brand of perpetual motion. The warring parties often seem unable to picture a world outside the conflict, with disastrous results. Israelis may believe that Palestinians will always be violent, while Palestinians may believe that Israelis will always be oppressive – and both sides tend to balk at being told otherwise.

"Most [conflict](#) resolution strategies require you to bring the two groups together," said Stanford psychology Professor Carol Dweck. "But just attempting this in an incendiary conflict can cause people to react negatively."

But, according to research by a team of Stanford psychologists, simply teaching Israelis and Palestinians that groups of people are generally capable of change – without ever mentioning a specific adversary – can have a markedly positive effect on their willingness to compromise. The paper appeared in last week's *Science*, with Dweck and fellow Stanford psychology Professor James Gross as senior authors.

Dweck has a history of studying how behaviors are affected by beliefs – in particular, beliefs about capacity for change. Studies from her lab have shown, for instance, that students who believe their intelligence can be developed do better in school than students who believe their intelligence is fixed.

Still, when former Stanford postdoc Eran Halperin, now at The Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, Israel, proposed exploring the topic in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the researchers were skeptical.

"After all, these are major, non-negotiable issues that the sides are disagreeing on," Dweck said.

The researchers conducted a national survey of Israeli Jews, with surprisingly encouraging results. The more people believed that groups could change, the more favorable were their attitudes toward Palestinians – and the more willing they were to make major compromises for the sake of peace. These included support for important territorial compromises and for joint sovereignty over holy places in Jerusalem.

To examine whether the beliefs about [group](#) change might have caused the respondents' willingness to compromise, the researchers presented a new sample of Israeli Jews with a news article. Half of the subjects read an article arguing that groups could change, giving examples of political violence that had decreased over time - as in Northern Ireland or the former Yugoslavia. The other subjects read an article arguing that groups couldn't change.

Even though Palestinians weren't mentioned in either article, the Israelis who had read that groups could change expressed more favorable attitudes toward Palestinians, and were more willing to compromise with them for peace.

When the researchers repeated the study with Palestinians – both within Israel and in the West Bank – they found identical results.

"I think the most amazing results were from the West Bank

Palestinians," said Dweck. "These included members of Fatah and Hamas – people who have no stake in the continued existence of Israel."

Dweck emphasizes that a longer-term study still remains to be performed, in order to demonstrate that this educational approach "can withstand constant episodes of violence." But the researchers have already repeated the study in Cyprus – another area with a longstanding political conflict – with promising results.

Provided by Stanford University

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