

Psychology and the chance of bringing peace to Syria

January 27 2014, by Ian H Robertson



What hope for an end to bloody conflict? Credit: Henry Patton

How can we explain the level of savagery that has been seen in Syria? And how on earth do the [negotiators in Geneva](#) hope to bridge an [abyss of cruelty and suffering](#) that has seen more than [100,000 people killed](#) and almost ten million displaced?

A first thought might be to see the Syrian crisis as simply an unmasking of man's primitive, animal nature. And there is a respectable evolutionary position which says that the [awful capacity of human beings](#)

[to murder their neighbours](#) has conferred a survival advantage by protecting the genes of your clan by killing off opposing clans.

But then you look at countries such as Sweden or Canada, where the genes hardly differ from those of Syria, but where large scale savagery has apparently been obliterated. And so we have to consider social, political, economic – and, just maybe – psychological, factors to explain the Syrian tragedy.

War bonds people together, and rates of psychological and psychiatric distress drop in populations which ally to face a common enemy. Witness the increase in suicide, for instance, after peace was established in Northern Ireland. People can display great self-sacrifice in the defence of "their people". But every in-group has to have an out-group against which it is defined and here lies a paradox which [recent research](#) has uncovered: if you strengthen the bonds within the in-group, tribe or clan – you boost the tendency to demonise and dehumanise the out-group.

In Primo Levi's classic description of life in the Auschwitz concentration camp, [If This is a Man](#), he describes how to survive you had to try to make a concentration camp guard see you, even momentarily, as a person and not a number. Otherwise, you were simply a non-person, an object – and the nicest of people do absolutely anything they feel like to objects. This is why many of the officers of Auschwitz were able to go home at night to the affection and normality of their families.

Shia v. Sunni

Shia and Sunni are pitted against each other in Syria, and the fact that [religion defines](#) the in- and out-groups, psychologically complicates the conflict. Research shows that in-group tribalism is strengthened – and loathing for the out-group correspondingly increased – where religion defines the groups. Even when aggression against the other group is self-

destructive – as we can see so tragically in Syria – religiously-based groups advocated a degree of aggression against their opponents which was absent in non-religiously defined groups.

But things have gone far beyond in-out group prejudice in Syria and other, rawer, emotions – fear, revenge and schadenfreude – now prevail. The logic is of a winner-takes-all game – if my group lives, yours will be extinguished. The perception on both sides now is of a fight to the finish for sheer survival.

And of course revenge drives people whose families and friends have been killed and maimed by the enemy to savage acts of vengeance. But while [revenge is such a powerful motivator.pdf](#)), it is a deceiver, because the evidence is that taking revenge on someone, far from quelling the distress and anger which drives it, actually perpetuates and magnifies it.

Revenge, then, is like heroin, and you need more and more to achieve the same elusive and short-lived high. So what on earth are these negotiators hoping to do in Geneva against this bleak psychological backdrop? One faint hope comes from [research](#) showing one thing that can make people less tribally prejudiced.

The Mandela model

Nowhere is this more clearly evident than in the different approaches to the conflict in South Africa shown by Nelson and Winnie Mandela.

When Nelson left prison, he discovered his wife leading a movement of visceral in-group tribalism, advocating necklace-killings of the out-group and revenge against the white oppressors.

Nelson Mandela voiced his aspiration for an abstract ideal – for a multi-racial South Africa – and he sold that concept to his people with the moral authority of someone who had spent 27 years in prison for fighting

for the cause. Momentously, he also told his people that he forgave his oppressors. These two abstract ideals – a multi-racial state and forgiveness – quelled the tribal violence which might otherwise have led to a Syrian-type bloodbath.

If there is hope for the Syrian peace talks, it is in the injection of abstract ideals into the carnage and self-defeating psychology of revenge, terror and dehumanisation of the enemy.

This story is published courtesy of [The Conversation](#) (under Creative Commons-Attribution/No derivatives).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Psychology and the chance of bringing peace to Syria (2014, January 27) retrieved 9 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-01-psychology-chance-peace-syria.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--