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A conflict within a conflict: intragroup ideological polarization and intergroup intractable conflict

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Ideology plays a central role in conflicts, both on the intergroup and intragroup levels. On the intergroup level, ideology can either contribute to the preservation and escalation of conflicts or serve as the key to resolving them. On the intragroup level, ideology can generate and induce conflicts between opposing ideological groups. However, the interaction between these two levels of conflict and the unique role of ideology in such interactions have not received sufficient systematic scholarly attention so far. We suggest a new theoretical framework emphasizing a possible reciprocal relationship between intractable intergroup conflicts and intragroup ideological polarization: intergroup conflict enhances inner polarization, which in turn, hinders the resolution of the external conflict.

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Ideology is broadly defined as a set of shared attitudes, values, and beliefs regarding the ideal social order, according to which individuals set their social goals and decide on the proper means for achieving them [1]. As a fundamental element in human personal and societal life, ideology is reflected in almost every choice we make, from our eating habits [2] and consumption behaviors [3] to our electoral voting preferences [4] and general worldviews on gender equality [5].

Given its nature, it is not surprising that ideology plays a significant role in all phases of intergroup conflicts [6]. Contradictions between different visions of the ideal social order are likely to arouse disagreements, and when individuals strongly identify with their ideological groups and are highly committed to applying their own [and their group's] ideal visions, these disagreements can quickly deteriorate into intergroup rivalry and clashes. In this context, one of the most common and well-studied societal ideologies is political ideology, a concept subject to extensive scholarly debate [for further elaboration: 7] but indisputably considered as having far-reaching implication on social life. Accordingly, political ideology will be our focus of interest in the following review.

When exploring the socio-psychological literature dealing with the role played by political ideology in group related conflicts, one can identify two predominant lines of research, each focusing on a different perspective or framework in which political ideology and conflicts interact. The first, addressing intergroup conflicts, is an extensive line of research dealing with the influence of different political ideologies within the ingroup on the interaction with the rival outgroup [e.g. 8•,9,10•]. The second, concentrating on intragroup conflicts, presents a thorough analysis of conflictual interaction between ideological subgroups within the same ingroup [e.g. 11•,12•,13]. In what follows, we will briefly review some of the latest findings in each of these domains, which have been continuously developing in recent years but are almost entirely separated from each other. Then, based on work from the fields of political psychology, international relations, and political science, we will introduce our initial theoretical framework regarding the nuanced reciprocal relationship between the two levels of conflict, according to which external intergroup conflict can enhance intragroup ideological polarization and *vice versa*.

Political ideology in the context of intractable intergroup conflicts

One of the most intense representations of intergroup conflict is an intractable conflict — a prolonged and violent conflict that is perceived to be irresolvable by the parties involved [14,15]. In this type of conflict, political ideology is particularly important since it becomes an elemental component of individuals' identity [16] and it influences the way they perceive and respond to the conflict, that could be either destructive or beneficial for the conflict resolution [6].

In the context of intractable conflict, political ideology provides individuals and societies with an explanation for the complex situation, and guidance as to how they should act regarding the conflict's major dilemmas [17]. One such a pervasive political ideology is the 'ethos of conflict' — a set of conflict-related societal beliefs that provide a clear, usually one-sided, narrative of the history

and current circumstances of the conflict, portraying the opponents as immoral and evil while portraying one's own side as moral and just [18]. This perspective helps individuals and societies to normalize the chaotic reality in which they live and enables mobilization of support for often militant goals and agendas in the conflict [19].

Unlike other societies, in which political ideology is greatly concerned with socio-economic issues, in societies involved in such long-term conflicts, individuals' political ideologies often focus on their central positions regarding the conflict itself [e.g. in Serbia – 20; in Ukraine – 21; in Israel – 22]. This ideology can be expressed in different ways, including adherence to the ethos of conflict [18], as well as by identification with 'left' (dovish) or 'right' (hawkish) conflict-related attitudes [23]. Recent studies, addressing these two manifestations of political ideology, have provided ample empirical support for the association between political ideology and intergroup conflict-related emotions, attitudes and perceptions. Since ideology serves as a moral and motivational ground for escalating and de-escalating such conflicts, findings mainly indicate an asymmetry between right and left political ideology in this context. We demonstrate it, focusing on three main targets: the adversary outgroup, the conflict itself and conflict-related policy preferences.

As for the first target, recent studies suggest that there are ideological differences in emotions expressed towards the adversary outgroup [9,10●,24,25], as well as in the regulation of such emotions [26●]. Studies conducted in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have found that Jewish-Israeli right-wing political ideology is associated with less recognition of the adversary's pain and suffering and less openness to its narrative [27–29]. In Cyprus, right-wing ideology was found to be associated with higher intergroup bias [30], and in the context of the conflict between Turks and Kurds in Turkey, perceptions reflecting adherence to the ethos of conflict were found to be associated with lower outgroup trust [31].

When it comes to the conflict itself, studies conducted in the Israeli context demonstrated that rightists are less embracive of a peace vision [32], and that right-wing political ideology is associated with lower expectations that peace will materialize and lower wishes to attain peace [33,34]. Similarly, a study from Cyprus has shown that support for rapprochement is considered a 'leftist goal' [35]. Ideology is also associated with the processing of conflict-related information; a study by Porat et al. found that high adherence to the ethos of conflict was associated with more selective processing of conflict-related information, which in turn led to less openness to new opportunities for promoting a peaceful resolution of the conflict [36].

In terms of policy preferences, both in Israel and in post-conflict Serbia, right-wing political ideology and high adherence to the ethos of conflict were found to be associated with decreased support for conciliatory policies and increased support for hardline and more aggressive policies [37,8●,38–40]. The strength of the moral conviction with which individuals hold their political ideology was found to moderate this association [41], and the type of perceived existential threat was found as mediating it [42].

Ideological conflict and divide within societies

Political ideology also plays a significant role in intragroup conflicts between factions within the same society, that although constitute separate subgroups, belong also to a joint superordinate group and share a clear and salient common identity [43]. These intragroup conflicts can have different levels of severity, starting from mere ideological disagreement, through mild or acute polarization [44], and eventually even civil war [45]. Due to the limited scope of this paper, we will refer only to political polarization, which has received extensive research attention in the field of political psychology and political behavior in recent years [e.g. 46–48].

Political polarization describes both the expanded ideological gap between political groups and the increased interpersonal separation between supporters of opposite parties [49,12●], which is frequently termed as affective polarization [For a review see: Ref. 50]. The study of affective polarization, conducted mainly in the U.S., suggests that polarization is reflected in mutual 'dislike' between opposing ideological groups [51] that has a destructive 'spillover' effect into social interaction outside the political realm [52–54].

A growing body of research indicates that affective polarization can escalate to a more severe form of animosity, including manifestations of hostile and aggressive attitudes, emotions, and behaviors, that are typically associated with intractable intergroup conflicts [55], and might even jeopardize the subgroups common identity. Recent findings have demonstrated that liberals and conservatives alike express prejudice [56], intolerance [57,58], willingness to discriminate [13], and lower empathy [59], when asked about target-groups that are perceived as representing the opposing ideology. Furthermore, several recent studies have vividly demonstrated dehumanization of those who hold different political ideologies [60,61,62●]. Although the hostility between opposing ideological groups is presented here as symmetrical, it is important to note that ongoing, heated scientific debate revolves around whether such extreme hostility is more inherent in right-wing ideology [for further elaboration see Refs. 63 and 64]. However, it is clear that manifestations of ideological animosity within societies, in general, have become more prevalent in recent years [11●].

The implication of affective political polarization and increased inter-partisan animosity, occasionally characterized even as an intractable inner conflict [65], is a deepening societal divide between ideological subgroups within the same society, occurring in many democracies around the world [e.g. 66–68]. While this process is described similarly in different places, not much attention has so far been paid to factors such as the specific context in which ideological groups interact, that might influence affective polarization. We suggest that in the context of intractable conflict — where political ideology focuses on the worldviews regarding the conflict itself, and thus the inner conflict between ideological factions involves existential concerns of society members — there is an additional layer to political affective polarization which should be taken into consideration.

Reciprocal relations between intragroup ideological conflict and intergroup intractable conflict

We have so far described findings from recent studies demonstrating the role of ideology in shaping attitudes, emotions, and behaviors, in the context of intractable intergroup conflict on the one hand, and in generating and preserving intragroup polarization, on the other. While these lines of research are developing simultaneously but almost completely separately, we wish to suggest that in the context of intractable conflict, there might be an association between the two. Specifically, we propose that the ideological gap between opposing political groups in intractable conflict – also representing different attitudes toward the opponent outgroup – might bolster internal animosity between ideological factions. This internal conflict, in turn, could reduce society's ability to handle the external conflict, and thus, the conflict is doomed to continue and feed itself. A striking example of such a process is the extreme political polarization within Israeli society in the period of Oslo accord, between those who supported or objected negotiating with the Palestinians. This polarization led eventually to the murder of the Israeli prime minister, Rabin, an act which is considered as one of the main reasons for the failure of the peace process [69].

Concerning this possible reciprocal relationship, we raise two fundamental questions: First, what might the influence of the external intractable conflict be on processes of political polarization within groups involved in the conflict? Second, how might polarization processes within these groups influence the possibility of promoting peaceful resolution of the conflict?

The possible influence of external conflict on intragroup polarization processes

The prevailing theoretical hypothesis in the fields of sociology, social psychology, and political science suggests that in times of conflict with an external enemy, societies tend to unite in order to cope more effectively with the external threat [70,71]. Accordingly, threat perception, which is one of the main causes of the unification process, is considered to lead to increased social cohesion [72] and a 'rally around the flag' response — cross-political support for the incumbent leader [73]. Studies support this notion empirically and demonstrate that when societies have faced collective external threats, the gap between ideological factions has decreased, in terms of both attitudes [74,75] and emotions [76], and the solidarity within the group has increased [77].

Nevertheless, empirical findings from recent years reflect a more complex reality, in which external conflict and threat do not necessarily lead to unification and may even enhance the divide and affective polarization between political and ideological factions. For example, Myrick (paper presented at the 2019 American Political Science Association Annual Meeting) recently demonstrated that in the current polarized reality in the U.S., an external security threat (portrayed to resemble a real possible threat posed by China), does not decrease affective polarization among Democrats and Republicans. In Israel, the external conflict can be seen as instigating animosity between the opposing ideological factions (hawks versus doves), as demonstrated in studies showing that merely holding opposing positions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, leads Jewish-Israelis to attribute negative characteristics to the ideological outgroup [78; Ross L. *et al.*, unpublished]. In a study conducted during the Israel-Gaza war, John and Dvir-Gvirsman [79] showed that during this escalation, many Jewish-Israelis, particularly those with extreme political ideologies, chose to 'unfriend' individuals with opposing ideology and remove them from their virtual social network, thus minimizing the contact with those who hold different worldviews. Although these studies indicate that polarization can actually take place when the external conflict is at its peak, none of them systematically and directly examine the underlying mechanisms.

What then, can explain the relations between intergroup conflict and affective polarization of ideological groups within society? One plausible option is that the variation of ideological positions regarding the conflict may be perceived as an additional internal threat, either existential (i.e. those who support compromise can be perceived as risking the group's security) or moral (i.e. those who support an aggressive policy may be perceived as damaging the group's moral image), and thus lead to increased polarization instead of cohesion [80]. This process might even be worsened if one subgroup will interpret the other stance as an expression of support for the threatening outgroup, which undermines the group's efforts against its rival. These hypotheses are preliminary, and since this line of research is relatively underdeveloped, many questions remain open and await thorough scholarly investigation.

Political polarization as a barrier to conflict resolution

Political polarization can also pose a significant challenge to leadership trying to mobilize society's support for a peace process [81,82]. History books provide us with evidence of the destructive consequences of polarization during attempts to promote compromise and end ongoing conflicts, as evident in the assassinations of already mentioned Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi, and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, all of whom were murdered by people from their own society who objected to their peaceful attempts at resolving continuous conflicts [69,83].

However, even when the results are not that tragic, ideological polarization may hinder peace efforts. The hindering effect can be structural, resulting in an inability of political leaders to implement controversial policies [84]. More generally, political polarization may function as a psychological barrier to resolving conflicts. Individuals in polarized societies may develop a tendency to avoid supporting policies that are perceived as involving high risk – such as making compromises that are essential to resolving conflicts [85] – as they fear that taking such risks could result in severe fragmentation of the ingroup. Perceived polarization, whether realistic or exaggerated [86], could also decrease individuals' confidence in society's collective efficacy, and as a result, might reduce their faith in the common ability to achieve social goals. These associations and their underlying mechanisms merit systematic examination focusing on two fundamental questions: how does the perception of ideological polarization impact individuals' support for a compromise, and which psychological mechanisms are involved in the 'hindering effect' of polarization on peace processes.

Conclusion

Several years ago, Dovidio [87] emphasized the necessity of studying reciprocal influences of intergroup and intragroup processes. The theoretical framework we have presented in this paper corresponds with this notion. We suggest that political ideology is not only a central component of intergroup and intragroup conflicts, as the research literature we have presented well demonstrates, but that ideology might also be a crucial factor for understanding how these two levels of conflict interact and influence one another.

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Tal Orian Harel: Conceptualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Ifat Maoz:** Conceptualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Eran Halperin:** Conceptualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

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