Are Groups in Conflict Willing to Help the Other Side Under a Joint External Threat? Lessons from COVID-19 in Israel

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Abstract (178 words)

With global changes, large-scale natural disasters have become more frequent and intense. Does their shared external threat influence the willingness of groups in conflict to cooperate and assist their adversaries, and in what ways? The literature produces inconsistent expectations, ranging from increased cooperation, to exacerbated animosity, to no discernable impact. Moreover, we know little about the priorities and tradeoffs that underlie support for collaborative policies in these situations. We explore this unresolved question in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict amid the COVID-19 pandemic, a salient exogenous threat faced by both societies. Using multiple surveys and a conjoint experiment, we examine whether COVID-19 threat perceptions affect Israeli-Jewish policy preferences and priorities for assisting Palestinians with the pandemic. We find that a greater perceived threat does not change the conflict's deep-seated attitudinal dynamics. Instead, support for assistance—and particularly a higher priority for Palestinian wellbeing alongside Israeli interests, medical assistance over forceful steps, and collaboration over unilateralism—vary by standard partisan ideology about the conflict. These sobering findings outline both constraints and opportunities for intergroup collaboration in conflicts facing collective outside challenges.

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Introduction

The growth of global human connectivity, globalization, and climate change have increased the occurrence and intensity of large-scale hazards such as extreme weather conditions, global pandemics, and various natural disasters. Their implications disregard political boundaries and pose shared threats to neighboring communities. Effective policy responses, accordingly, often depend on intergroup cooperation and assistance. This challenge is particularly weighty in active conflicts, where out-group members are perceived as enemies, intergroup collaboration is uncommon, and power relations are often asymmetric. Do joint external threats change the willingness of in-group members to assist and collaborate with rival groups in conflict, and, if so, in what ways?

The literature provides conflicting answers to this question (Gleditsch 2012; Ide and Scheffran 2014; Koubi 2019; Meierding 2013; Theisen 2017). Some studies suggest that shared external threats can promote de-escalation, superordinate identities, and intergroup cooperation in active conflicts. Others argue that such threats are likely to exacerbate ethnocentrism, intergroup tensions, and competition over limited resources. Finally, still others claim that these threats lack discernible impact, positive or negative, on the longstanding dynamics of conflicts. This uncertainty is augmented by scholarly inattention to the policy priorities and tradeoffs that in-group members are willing to make between their own group's interests and the other side's needs in such situations.

In this paper, we address these questions using original survey data collected in Israel during the COVID-19 pandemic, a joint threat posed to both Israelis and Palestinians exogenously of their conflict. We focus on Israeli-Jewish public opinion, which offers particularly useful conditions for our purposes: as the stronger group in an asymmetric conflict, Israelis can consider many possible policy options with varying degrees of assistance, use of force, and in-group and out-group benefits and costs.[1] We examine two interrelated questions. First, using multiple public opinion surveys, we explore whether higher levels of perceived threat from the pandemic affect general support for Israeli assistance with COVID-19 on the Palestinian side. Second, using a

[1] We concentrate on the attitudes of Jews due to their straightforward rivalry with the Palestinians. Arab citizens of Israel have more complex attitudes toward the Palestinians, and, therefore, justify separate theoretical and empirical exploration.

conjoint experiment, we study whether greater COVID-19 threat perceptions influence multidimensional policy priorities for such interventions.

Our findings show that a greater sense of threat from the pandemic has no real effect, positive or negative, on Israeli Jews' preferences to assist the Palestinians to contain COVID-19. This null result applies to both general support and specific policy priorities. Instead, we corroborate the third explanation in the literature: even under a salient mutual danger, support for intergroup assistance and collaboration is dominated by the conflict's longstanding divisions. In Israel, attitudes on the conflict are divided between left-wing doves and right-wing hawks. Our findings, accordingly, show that left-wing respondents express greater support for Israeli involvement, improving Palestinian wellbeing through benevolent measures, bearing some in-group costs, and collaborating with Palestinian authorities. Right-wing respondents, conversely, are less favorable of intervention and prefer unilateral military actions that advance Israeli interests more narrowly and forcefully. Nevertheless, we also find some shared priorities, outlining the boundaries of out-group solidarity among the Doves and out-group resentment among the Hawks when facing joint threats.

The paper contributes to a growing, and hitherto unsettled, debate about conflict and intergroup relations in a world with increasingly frequent large-scale disasters. Our analysis not only tests the literature's primary competing hypotheses in a salient setting but also broadens the discussion's consideration of multidimensional public preferences. On the one hand, contrary to theories predicting de-escalation, we provide a sobering perspective on the expectation that joint exogenous threats would change intergroup dynamics in active conflicts. Instead, past rivalries and partisan identities remain dominant and can obstruct cooperative solutions in favor of one-sided, self-interested, and even aggressive policies with suboptimal outcomes. On the other, contrary to pessimist arguments, we identify some silver linings. First, the attitudinal barriers for collaboration are not uniform: dovish, and to some extent centrist, in-group members are open to cooperative solutions that promote both sides' interests. Second, even hawkish partisans, who prioritize their group interests more strictly, reject policies that actively harm the out-group and are open to partial collaboration. As discussed in the paper's conclusion, these patterns leave room, even if limited, for domestic and international actors to tailor nuanced messaging and policies that accommodate these structural biases and advance better collective outcomes.

We proceed by outlining the three competing explanations suggested in the literature, and then present our case study and propose several hypotheses in this context. Next, we introduce our data and research design and then discuss our findings and their scope conditions. We close with several conclusions and takeaways.

The Literature: Three Competing Expectations

Intergroup relations in ongoing conflicts are typically analyzed by their intrinsic threats and contentions. Yet, in recent years, a large body of work has explored the influence of shared *external* threats—climate anomalies, pandemics, and other natural disasters—on intergroup relations in conflictual settings (Gleditsch 2012; Ide and Scheffran 2014; Koubi 2019; Meierding 2013; Theisen 2017). These studies provide contradictory expectations and findings, which can be grouped into three primary theories: greater cooperation, greater hostility, and politics as usual.

The *cooperation theory* posits that shared external threats can lessen existing animosities in conflicts, foster greater intergroup collaboration, and help advance diplomatic initiatives. Several explanatory mechanisms underlie this expectation. First, a shared threat can increase empathy and solidarity with out-group members undergoing similar negative experiences and implications. This sense of shared fate can weaken perceived intergroup divisions and help establish superordinate identities and trust (De Juan and Hänze 2021; Flade et al. 2019; Giannakakis and Fritsche 2011; Pyszczynski et al. 2012). Second, when shared threats are addressed better collaboratively, intergroup cooperation can also be driven by self-interest (Ker-Lindsay 2000; Kreutz 2012). Moreover, such collaboration can establish longer-term networks and local institutions to regulate recurring problems and common risks (Linke et al. 2018; Long 2011; Tubi and Feitelson 2016). Indeed, empirical works in this vein find that shared threats and natural disasters raise the probability of ceasefires and peace talks and lower the chances of violence in active conflicts (Kelman 2012; Salehyan and Hendrix 2014; Slettebak 2012). Furthermore, such moments can increase popular support for collaboration, particularly when considered effective against outside threats and when initial intergroup violence levels are low (Akcinaroglu et al. 2011; Halperin et al. 2013).

Other research, however, expects the opposite implications. The *hostility theory* posits that shared outside threats are likely to worsen intergroup relations, hinder cooperation, and incite greater violence due to several mechanisms. First, outside threats tend to increase in-group

identification as a defense mechanism against uncertainty, loss of control, and fear of death (Fritsche et al. 2013; Greenberg et al. 2016; Wohl et al. 2010). This tendency projects negatively on the out-group, often amplifying hostility, stereotypical thinking, de-humanization, and blame attribution (Cuddy et al. 2007; Dionne and Turkmen 2020; Greenberg et al. 2016). Second, joint threats frequently deepen intergroup competition over limited resources necessary to deal with the crisis (Brancati 2007; Heslin 2021; Nel and Righarts 2008; Von Uexkull et al. 2016), especially when it widens existing economic and political inequalities between rival groups (De Juan et al. 2020; Montalvo and Reynal-Querol 2019; Von Uexkull et al. 2016). Third, outside threats and disasters can weaken state institutions, lowering the cost of violence for challenger groups that seek to change the status quo and recruit supporters (Heslin 2021; Linke et al. 2018; van Baalen and Mobjörk 2018). Backing these expectations empirically, experimental and survey analyses find that salient outside threats and disasters increase out-group hostility, reluctance to collaborate, and support for violence (Brewer 2000; Hirschberger et al. 2008; Wohl et al. 2010). Additional large-n and case-study analyses identify higher violence levels, greater probability for strife over resources, and aggressive border control measures in existing conflicts facing such crises (Berrebi and Ostwald 2011; Breckner and Sunde 2019; Eastin 2018; van Weezel 2019).

Whereas the first two theories disagree about the direction by which external threats change intergroup relations in conflicts, the *politics-as-usual theory* expects that they have no meaningful influence in either way. According to this perspective, new joint threats rarely change the deep ethnic, economic, institutional, and ideological divisions through which groups in conflict interact and handle new challenges. Even when shared goals are identified, they are insufficient to establish intergroup trust and superordinate identities (Brewer 2000). The result, according to several empirical analyses, is neither newfound solidarity nor greater hostility but a continuation of the conflict's core divisions and violence levels even under new joint threats (Bergholt and Lujala 2012; Omelicheva 2011; Theisen et al. 2013; Vergani et al. 2019).

The three conflicting arguments are further constrained by their dependent variables. Although the literature examines a variety of outcomes, it tends to focus either on conflict-level consequences (e.g., violence levels or peace initiatives) or on individual-level attitudes regarding the out-group and general cooperation. This tendency leaves open questions about the exact type of collaborative initiatives that group members are willing to support under a shared external threat. This is particularly important given the various tradeoffs, considerations, and priorities that

such policies can advance regarding the in-group's and the out-group's interests. As studies of redistributive or immigration attitudes demonstrate, popular support for public policies often conceals more nuanced multidimensional preferences varying by different benefits and costs (Busemeyer and Garritzmann 2017; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015; Häusermann et al. 2019; Valentino et al. 2019). Hence, we are faced with an even deeper uncertainty: how exactly, if it all, do perceptions of shared external threats affect support for *specific policy priorities* regarding cooperation with the other side?

Context: COVID-19 and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

We examine this question using Israeli public opinion during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Large-scale pandemics exhibit several salient attributes of shared external threats. Highly contagious diseases can transmit across borders and groups and pose a similar hazard for all within their range. Moreover, they increase the demand for limited resources, such as protective gear, medical treatment, and funds for collateral economic damages. Their interpersonal transmission also raises the chances of intergroup scapegoating, especially when popularly associated with particular ethnic or social groups (Dionne and Turkmen 2020; Nelkin and Gilman 1988; Reny and Barreto 2020). Finally, pandemics put palpable pressure on state institutions, whose limited powers, resources, and attention are diverted to contain the transmission and its public health and economic consequences. As such, pandemics exemplify an enduring joint threat whose progression strongly depends on collective containment.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic is a salient example of these attributes: it is highly infectious, travels by air, and can cause severe respiratory complications, long-term symptoms, and death (He et al. 2020; Rothan and Byrareddy 2020). The virus spread globally since December 2019, infecting, by estimates, more than 300 million people worldwide and causing 5.5 million deaths as of January 2022.[2] To contain its spread, many governments implemented movement and activity restrictions with severe social and economic ramifications for both domestic markets and the global economy (Bosancianu et al. 2020; Nicola et al. 2020).

Initial studies on the implications of COVID-19 for conflicts echo the literature's contradictory expectations, noting cross-conflict and regional variation (Bloem and Salemi 2021;

[2] Data retrieved on January 7, 2022 from the COVID-19 Dashboard, the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University (Dong et al. 2020).

Ide 2021). Some conflicts, for example in the Middle East, experienced increased friction (Mehrl and Thurner 2021). These tensions are attributed to rebel exploitation of weaker state institutions amid insufficient international attention (Ide 2021), intergroup strain due to the pandemic's economic costs and deepening inequalities (Gottlieb and LeBas 2020), and greater xenophobia (Dionne and Turkmen 2020; Reny and Barreto 2020). In other regions, however, such as Europe and East Asia, the pandemic was followed by lower violence rates, mostly explained as a strategic hiatus given fewer opportunities rather than greater intergroup solidarity (Ide 2021; Mehrl and Thurner 2021). Considering these mixed results, Polo (2020) suggests that the pandemic, despite its global magnitude and enormous implications, has not changed existing patterns of violence around the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not spare Israelis and Palestinians, who have been engaged in a century-old violent conflict over territory and self-determination. The disease was first diagnosed in Israel in February 2020 and soon expanded exponentially. The Israeli government responded with a series of state-wide lockdowns, school shutdowns, border closures, and extensive social distancing and tracking measures (Maor et al. 2020). The first cases of COVID-19 in the Palestinian territories were diagnosed in early March 2020, not long after Israel. Although its initial spread was slower, it gained quicker traction over the summer, particularly when the pandemic reached the denser and poorer Gaza Strip. The Palestinian authorities, too, enacted periodic lockdowns, movement restrictions, and distancing and quarantine measures (AlKhaldi et al. 2020; Qutob and Awartani 2021). During the pandemic's first year, 428,510 Israelis and 139,223 Palestinians were infected, 3,356 Israelis and 1,418 Palestinians died, and many more experienced meaningful economic losses (Dong et al. 2020). Both societies' seven-day rolling averages of daily new infections per million people are presented in Figure 1. For better comparability, we examine only the period predating the first FDA approval of vaccines in December 2020.

This context offers a particularly useful case study for the influence of external threat perceptions on the willingness to assist and collaborate with an adversary under shared danger. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has deep historical roots with recurring violent episodes, intergroup hostility, and strong political salience. Nevertheless, the global COVID-19 outbreak is exogenous

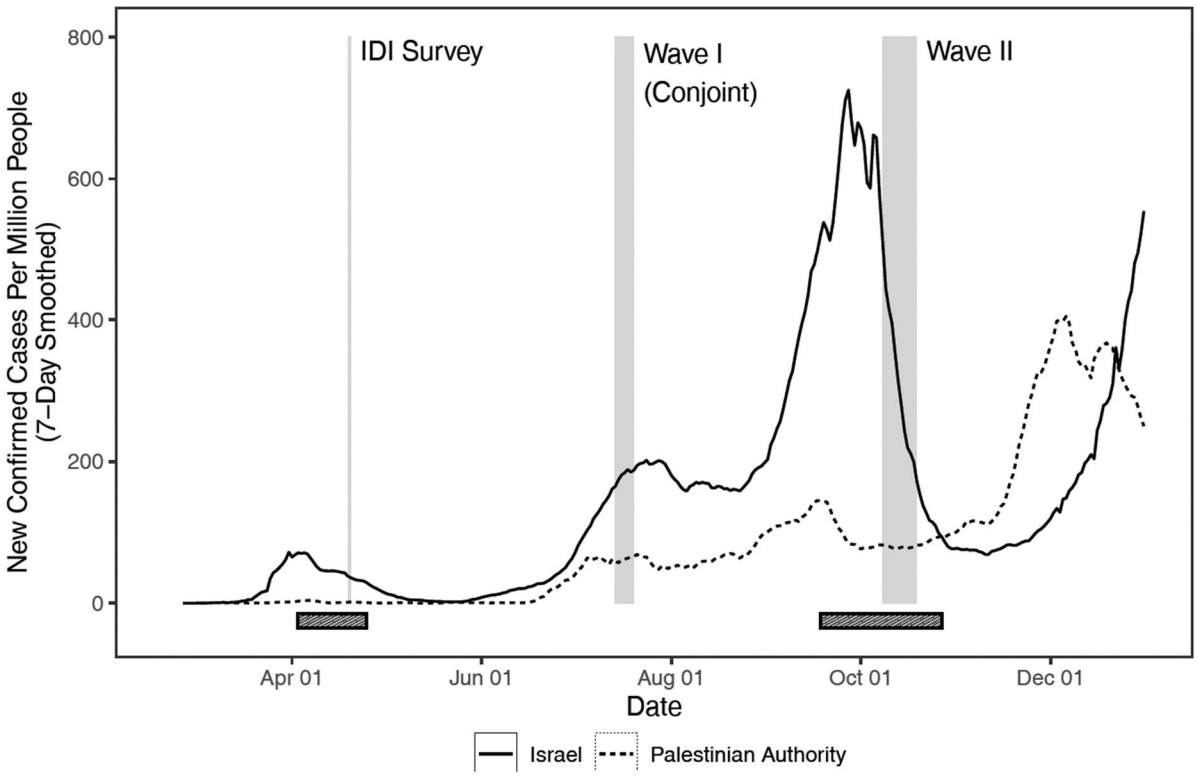

Figure 1. New Confirmed COVID-19 Cases Per Million (7-Day Smoothed) in Israel and Palestine, February-December 2020

The shaded areas mark the period that each survey was in the field. The striped boxes under the plot mark periods with national stay-at-home lockdowns in Israel. Data source: The Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University.

to the conflict's core contentions. Moreover, while they reside separately, the two populations have regular contact—through Israel's military occupation, Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and tens of thousands of Palestinian Laborers who cross into Israel daily—that increases the collective threat of intergroup transmissions. Finally, the conflict is asymmetric: Israel has more resources and military power, occupies parts of the West Bank and entry points to the Gaza strip, and controls various infrastructural, civil, and economic aspects of Palestinian lives. Yet during the pandemic's first year, the Israeli government did not publicly outline clear policies regarding COVID-19 in the Palestinian territories. Hence, in this period, Israeli citizens could unbiasedly weigh a broad menu of plausible interventions by their government. Given Israel's control of the territories, some might also feel legally or morally obligated to help the Palestinians, a point that we revisit in the paper's conclusion. With this context in mind, we now turn to hypothesize about the considerations that could guide such preferences.

Hypotheses: Multidimensional Assistance Preferences by Israeli Jews

Our research aims to test which of the three theories—greater cooperation, greater hostility, or politics as usual—best characterizes the influence of COVID-19 threat perceptions on Israeli-Jewish support for COVID-19 assistance in the Palestinian territories. Rather than hypothesizing only about the direction of support, we also consider the multidimensional nature of these preferences, particularly the balance between the in-group's and out-group's costs and benefits.

According to the *cooperation* hypothesis, a greater sense of threat from COVID-19 should increase support for interventions assisting the Palestinians. Nevertheless, this tendency can reflect two distinct motivations with differing policy priorities. On the one hand, a common threat can increase the sense of shared fate and solidarity. In this case, greater threat perceptions should increase support for cooperative policies advancing Palestinian wellbeing as an end in itself, even at some Israeli costs (H1.a). On the other, controlling the pandemic on the Palestinian side may also seem like an effective way to advance Israel's own interests, especially lower intergroup transmissions. In this case, greater perceptions of COVID-19 threat should increase support for policies focused on mitigating Palestinian infections but with lower priority for their wellbeing and for incurring in-group costs (H1.b).

By contrast, the *hostility* hypothesis posits that a greater perceived threat from COVID-19 would increase opposition to interventions assisting the Palestinians. This hypothesis, too, masks two possible motivations. According to one, a greater sense of threat may shift focus to the in-group's domestic needs, lowering support for any active involvement related to the out-group (H2.a). According to another, this tendency can reflect greater out-group animosity, increasing support for forceful unilateral actions aimed at blocking intergroup transmission while undermining Palestinian interests (H2.b).

Finally, the *politics-as-usual* hypothesis suggests that a greater sense of threat from COVID-19 should not have a meaningful effect on support and policy priorities for Israeli intervention. According to this argument, these preferences should vary by standard partisan positions about the conflict. In Israel, the main ideological cleavage is set between supporters of territorial compromise on the partisan Left and opposers of the two-state solution on the partisan Right, with centrist voters in between (Arian and Shamir 2008; Manekin et al. 2019; Shamir and Arian 1999). Hence, support for Israeli intervention should be higher among leftists regardless of

COVID-19 threat perceptions (H3.a). Left-wingers should also care more for Palestinian wellbeing, cost sharing, and direct cooperation, whereas right-wingers should prioritize Israeli interests and unilateral actions at the expense of Palestinian wellbeing (H3.b).

Data and Explanatory Variables

To test which of the competing hypotheses best explains Israeli Jews' preferences, we collected original survey data during the first year of the pandemic. We focus on this period as it involved constant levels of anxiety and uncertainty and predated the introduction of vaccines. Our data are from two sources at three points in time. First, we fielded a two-wave online survey of Israeli Jews on July 14-20, 2020 (survey wave 1) and October 8-19, 2020 (survey wave 2). The first wave included both a questionnaire and a conjoint experiment, on which we elaborate later, whereas the second wave featured only a standard questionnaire. The two-wave survey was conducted by iPanel, an Israeli online-polling firm, using quota sampling representing Israel's adult Jewish population.[3] Wave 1 comprises a sample of 1,510 respondents out of 7,086 panelists who were invited to participate, while the second wave revisits 1,033 first-wave respondents using similar representative quotas. Second, we complement these data with an earlier poll fielded by the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI) on April 19-20, 2020, using a representative sample of 569 Israeli Jews. Together, we have three representative surveys conducted three months apart at particularly tense moments: two surveys (April and October) were fielded amid strict national lockdowns during or after pandemic waves and the third (July) during a peak in new cases foreshadowing a resurgence. The data collection dates are shaded in grey in Figure 1.

Our primary explanatory variables measure several aspects of COVID-19 threat perceptions. First, we gauge prospective *health concerns* by asking respondents about the degree to which they are worried that they or close family members would be harmed by COVID-19 health-wise. Second, we ask a similar question about prospective *economic concerns*, i.e., worry that respondents or close family members would be hurt economically by the pandemic. Third, we measure retrospective health-related harm by asking respondents whether they, their family members, or their close friends were *diagnosed* with COVID-19. Fourth, we also ask whether they were placed in home *quarantine* after exposure to a COVID-19 patient. Finally, we measure

[3] We use quotas for gender, age group, religiosity, and geographic region. Section 1 in the Supplementary Appendix (SA) discusses the sampling procedures and the data's demographic representativeness.

retrospective *economic loss* by asking whether respondents' economic situation has improved or worsened in the past few months. The IDI survey, which was fielded when the pandemic was still in its infancy, only asks about forward-looking concerns.

Our third hypothesis points to respondents' standard ideological positions on the conflict. Since Left and Right are defined in Israel primarily in terms of the conflict, we measure ideology using *left-right self-identification* on a 7-point scale. Because the IDI poll does not include an ideological self-identification question, we instead recode respondents' *party vote* in the March 2020 election by three ideological blocs: Left, Center, and Right.[4]

General Willingness to Help the Palestinians

Dependent Variable

We begin our analysis by examining the general willingness to assist the Palestinians in containing COVID-19 in April, July, and October 2020. We measure this outcome using one of two questions, depending on the survey. The IDI survey (April) includes the following question: "In your opinion, to what extent should Israel assist the Palestinian authorities in the West Bank/Judea and Samaria in dealing with the Coronavirus pandemic in the territories under their control?" Our two surveys (July and October) ask: "Some think that Israel should refrain from taking any steps regarding the coronavirus situation in the Palestinian territories and focus only on the pandemic within Israel. Do you agree or disagree?" Both questions use a 4-point scale of agreement or disagreement.[5]

The two questions provide slightly different emphases: the IDI poll asks explicitly about assistance and only about the West Bank, whereas our question asks more generally about "taking steps" and contrasts them with focusing on domestic needs. Nevertheless, both gauge a willingness to take action to contain the pandemic on the Palestinian side. This similarity is evident in Table 1, which presents the distribution of positive and negative answers by survey. Despite different wording and timing, all polls show a near-identical 50:50 split between supporters and opposers

[4] The parties are coded by their ideological positions on the conflict. The Left bloc includes Labor-Gesher-Meretz and the Joint List; the Center bloc includes Blue and White; and the Right bloc includes Likud, Israel Beitenu, Yamina, Shas, United Torah Judaism, and Otzma Yehudit.

[5] Since the July/October question asks about refrainment from assistance, we reverse the scale such that greater disagreement reflects higher support for involvement.

Table 1. Support vs Opposition for Assistance with COVID-19 in the Palestinian Territories

	April (IDI)	July (Wave 1)	October (Wave 2)
Support	50.6%	49%	49.6%
Opposition	49.4%	51%	50.4%
Observations	569	1,510	1,033

The categories combine strong and weak support/opposition in the original 4-point scale.

of Israeli involvement. The temporal stability is validated at the individual level: a paired t-test reveals no statistically significant change in respondents' answers between July and October.

Findings

Which of the three explanations best explains support for Israeli involvement? To examine this question, we regress these measures on respondents' COVID-19 threat perceptions. We also include partisan identification/vote and controls for sex, age group, income, education (unavailable in the IDI survey), and religiosity. The full questions and descriptive data appear in SA Section 2.

The results, presented in Table 2, reject the general cooperation and hostility hypotheses and support the politics-as-usual expectation. Individual differences in COVID-19 threat perceptions, whether related to health or the economy, do not explain respondents' answers. While we do find some correlation with retrospective impact, it is small and inconsistent: having been diagnosed with COVID-19 is associated with slightly lower support for assistance in July but not in October, where the coefficient also flips signs. Likewise, economic loss during the pandemic has a statistically significant correlation in July but not in October. In both cases, the coefficient sizes are minor. Meanwhile, all three polls show a clear relationship between more rightist self-identification/voting and lower willingness to help with COVID-19 in the Palestinian territories. Hence, standard partisan ideology is the only consistent explanation.

The insignificant influence of COVID-19 threat perceptions is corroborated by several additional tests, detailed in SA Section 4. First, we do not find meaningful interactions between COVID-19 threat perceptions and ideological orientation, ruling out a heterogeneous effect by ideology. Second, taking advantage of our panel data, we re-estimated our models using individual-level *change* in COVID-19 threat perceptions between July and October. Yet, like their absolute levels, changes in threat perceptions or harm do not correlate with respondent preferences. Third, by matching respondents' localities with municipal-level COVID-19 data, we examine whether objective local COVID-19 levels are more predictive than subjective threat perceptions.

Table 2. The Influence of COVID-19 Threat Perceptions on the Willingness to Help with COVID-19 in the Palestinian Territories (OLS Regression)

	(1) April	(2) July	(3) October
Health Concern	-0.010	0.014	-0.003
	(0.050)	(0.020)	(0.026)
Economic Concern	0.001	-0.024	-0.020
	(0.051)	(0.021)	(0.026)
Diagnosed		-0.148*	0.123
		(0.064)	(0.063)
Quarantined		0.081	0.096
		(0.057)	(0.061)
Economic Loss		0.054*	0.022
		(0.026)	(0.034)
Left-Right (Vote): Left	0.619***		
	(0.169)		
Left-Right (Vote): Right	-0.361***		
	(0.106)		
Left-Right (Self-identification)		-0.140***	-0.177***
		(0.016)	(0.020)
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	473	1,477	1,013
R^2	0.155	0.183	0.224

*Standard errors in parentheses, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001. The baseline category for Left-Right (Vote) is Center. Demographic controls include sex, age group, income, education (models 2 and 3), and religiosity. A table with full controls is available in SA Section 3.1.*

This measure, too, is statistically insignificant. Finally, to consider whether COVID-19 threat perceptions depend on greater geographic proximity to the Palestinians, we re-estimated our models only with Jews residing in Jerusalem and West Bank settlements. The null results sustain.

Policy Priorities

Experimental Design

Thus far, we examined respondents' general support for Israeli involvement. However, such questions tell us very little about concrete policy priorities when sensing a shared external threat. To unpack these multidimensional preferences, we included a conjoint experiment in the first wave of our survey. This experimental technique asks respondents to select their preferred option out of pairs of hypothetical policy choices with randomly assigned attributes. Using logistic regressions, we can leverage the random assignment of attributes to isolate how each independently influences the probability to prefer a policy (Bansak et al. 2021).

Our design asked respondents to choose from pairs of suggested Israeli policies for COVID-19 containment on the Palestinian side. Respondents were shown a prompt noting the parallel pandemic outbreak in the Palestinian territories and asking them to place themselves in the Israeli government's shoes as it decides on a proper policy.[6] They were subsequently presented with five pairs of policies with randomly assigned components. After each pair, they had to choose their preferred alternative.

The policies vary by five attributes, summarized in Table 3. The first attribute describes the suggested action, featuring different mixes of in-group self-interest and out-group wellbeing/harm. One end of the spectrum suggests that Israel should provide medical aid for severe Palestinian patients, i.e., pure humanitarian assistance without Israeli gain. The second alternative supplies protective equipment to decrease Palestinian infections, which helps the latter but also serves Israel's interest in mitigating intergroup transmissions. The other side of the range includes two unilateral actions employing military force to prevent cross-border infections: a milder step banning Palestinian worker entry into Israel and a harsher imposition of a military lockdown on Palestinian towns. These options prioritize Israel's self-interest at the expense of Palestinian wellbeing with varying degrees of out-group harm. In between, we include a passive option of establishing a situation room to monitor the pandemic in Palestine from afar.

To further isolate respondents' consideration of in-group and out-group interests, the second and third attributes detail each policy's expected impact on Palestinian illness and transmissions into Israel. The former randomizes whether the policy is expected to improve, have no effect, or deteriorate COVID-19 illness levels on the Palestinian side, while the latter states whether the policy is expected to mitigate or have no effect on cross-border infections into Israel. We avoid the possibility of worse transmission rates into Israel, which no government would plausibly adopt. Our design includes two constraints on these attributes. First, we exclude a contradictory combination of Israeli medical aid and worse Palestinian illness. Second, we disallow improvement in Palestinian wellbeing due to passive monitoring.

The fourth attribute examines the extent to which respondents are willing to bear in-group costs. We include three options. On the one extreme, we suggest that Israel fully fund the policy from its national budget. On the other, we propose that Israel deduct the policy's full costs from Palestinian tax funds, which are collected regularly by Israel before being transferred to the

[6] The full prompt is available in SA Section 2.3.

Table 3. Conjoint Experiment Attributes

Attribute	Components
Policy type	1. Providing medical aid for Palestinian COVID-19 patients in critical condition 2. Supplying protective equipment and disinfectants to the Palestinian public 3. Establishing a situation room to monitor the pandemic in the Palestinian society 4. Prohibiting Palestinian worker entry into Israel and reinforcing checkpoints for this purpose 5. Imposing a full military lockdown to prevent Palestinian movement outside of their towns
Expected impact on COVID-19 illness among the Palestinians	1. Improvement in Palestinian illness 2. No effect on Palestinian illness 3. Deterioration in Palestinian illness
Expected impact on transmission into Israel	1. Reduction in infections between Palestinians and Israelis 2. No effect on infections between Palestinians and Israelis
Funding source	1. The Israeli government's budget 2. Deduction from Palestinian income taxes, which Israel collects in their name and is used by the Palestinian government for salaries, welfare, infrastructure, and security 3. Half from the Israeli government's budget and half from Palestinian tax deduction
Coordination with the Palestinians	1. Ongoing coordination with the Palestinian Authority and with Hamas 2. Ongoing coordination with the Palestinian Authority but not with Hamas 3. No ongoing coordination

Palestinian government. Interference in this technical procedure, which was done before by Israeli governments as a sanction, forces the full costs onto the Palestinians without consent. To ensure that respondents are aware of the implications, we explicitly mention that these Palestinian tax funds are earmarked for various public services. In between, we include an option that splits the costs equally.

Finally, the fifth attribute probes the preferred level of cooperation with Palestinian authorities in the policy's implementation. The Palestinian government is currently divided between two rivaling parties. The Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank is headed by Fatah, a more moderate faction that previously engaged in negotiations with Israel and maintains regular coordination with the Israeli Defense Forces. The Gaza Strip, by contrast, is governed by Hamas, an extremist Islamist organization with hostile positions and violence against Israel. We include three alternatives: full coordination with both the PA and Hamas, limited coordination only with the PA but not Hamas, and no coordination at all. Taken together, the different policy attributes provide a more nuanced view into the scope of involvement and underlying tradeoffs that Israeli Jews are willing to support during the COVID-19 crisis.

Findings

To analyze our conjoint experiment, we estimate the marginal means (MMs) of each attribute component, reflecting the probability that respondents would prefer a policy with this feature (Leeper et al. 2020). MM values of 0.5, the grand-mean probability of choosing one of any two options, serve as the baseline null effect. Accordingly, MMs higher or lower than 0.5 indicate a greater or smaller probability, respectively, of preferring a policy with that attribute level. This analytical approach is particularly useful when comparing respondent subgroups, as we do below.

The results for the full sample are presented in Figure 2.[7] The preferences for policy type are relatively minor: we see a slight preference for denying worker entry, but opposition to full military lockdowns and passive monitoring. Positive assistance policies are not discernibly favored or rejected. The second and third attributes show that most respondents prefer positive outcomes for both sides: they prioritize policies that lower Palestinian illness and oppose those that cause deterioration, and, similarly, prefer policies that decrease intergroup infections to those that make no difference. There is a clear objection to funding interventions solely with Israeli money and a strong preference to impose all costs on the Palestinians, or, to a lesser extent, split them. Finally, on average, respondents prefer to collaborate only with the PA and tend to reject uncoordinated policies. Hence, aggregately, Israeli Jews do not have a strong preference for the exact type of

[7] SA Section 3.2 presents the results in table form alongside alternative estimations of Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs). Several diagnostic tests, detailed in SA Section 5, verify that our conjoint experiment is sufficiently powered, presented all attributes at similar frequencies, does not exhibit carryover effects by task or profile order, and is properly balanced across respondent attributes.

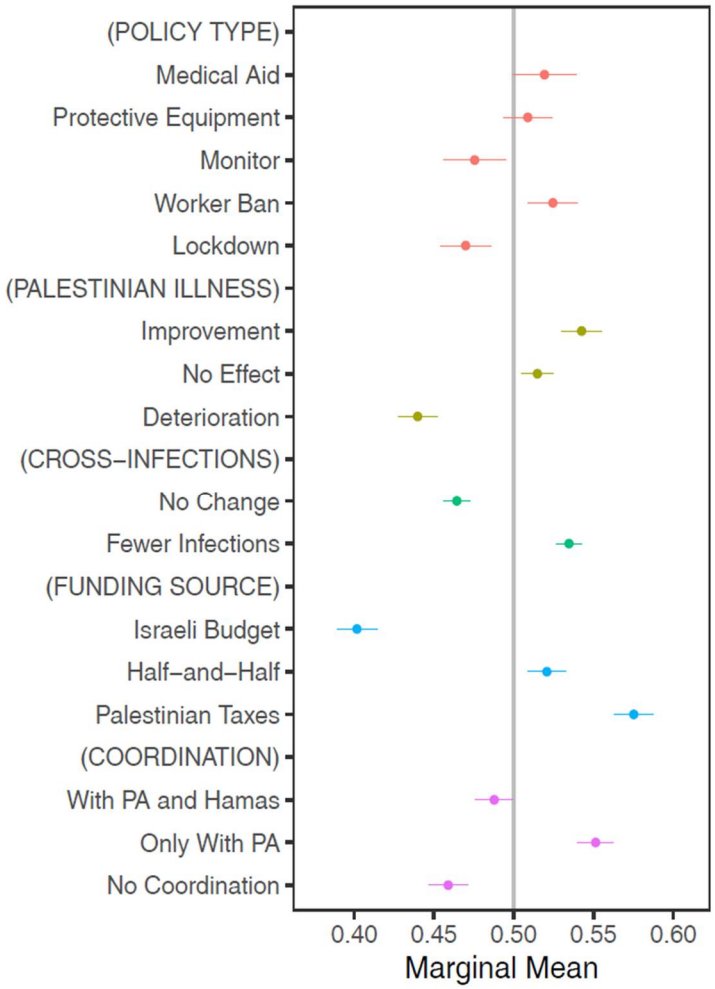

Figure 2. Marginal Means of Different Policy Attributes, Full Sample
The dots and horizontal lines indicate point estimates with 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered by respondent. Attribute titles are presented in all caps and parentheses.

assistance policy, so long as it can help both sides, lower in-group costs, and include coordination with moderates only.

Can COVID-19 threat perceptions explain these preferences? Figure 3 separates the marginal means by different levels of health and economic concerns.[8] Consistent with our earlier results, we do not see meaningful subgroup differences in either a positive or negative direction. Instead, all subgroups cluster together across attributes. Indeed, an omnibus F-test cannot reject zero subgroup differences in either health ($F = 1.34$, $p = 0.08$) or economic ($F = 0.8$, $p = 0.8$) threat perceptions at the 95% level. A robustness test, presented in SA Section 4.1, again rules out a

[8] Since these perceptions are measured on a 5-point scale, we cluster 1-2 as Low, 3 as Medium, and 4-5 as High.

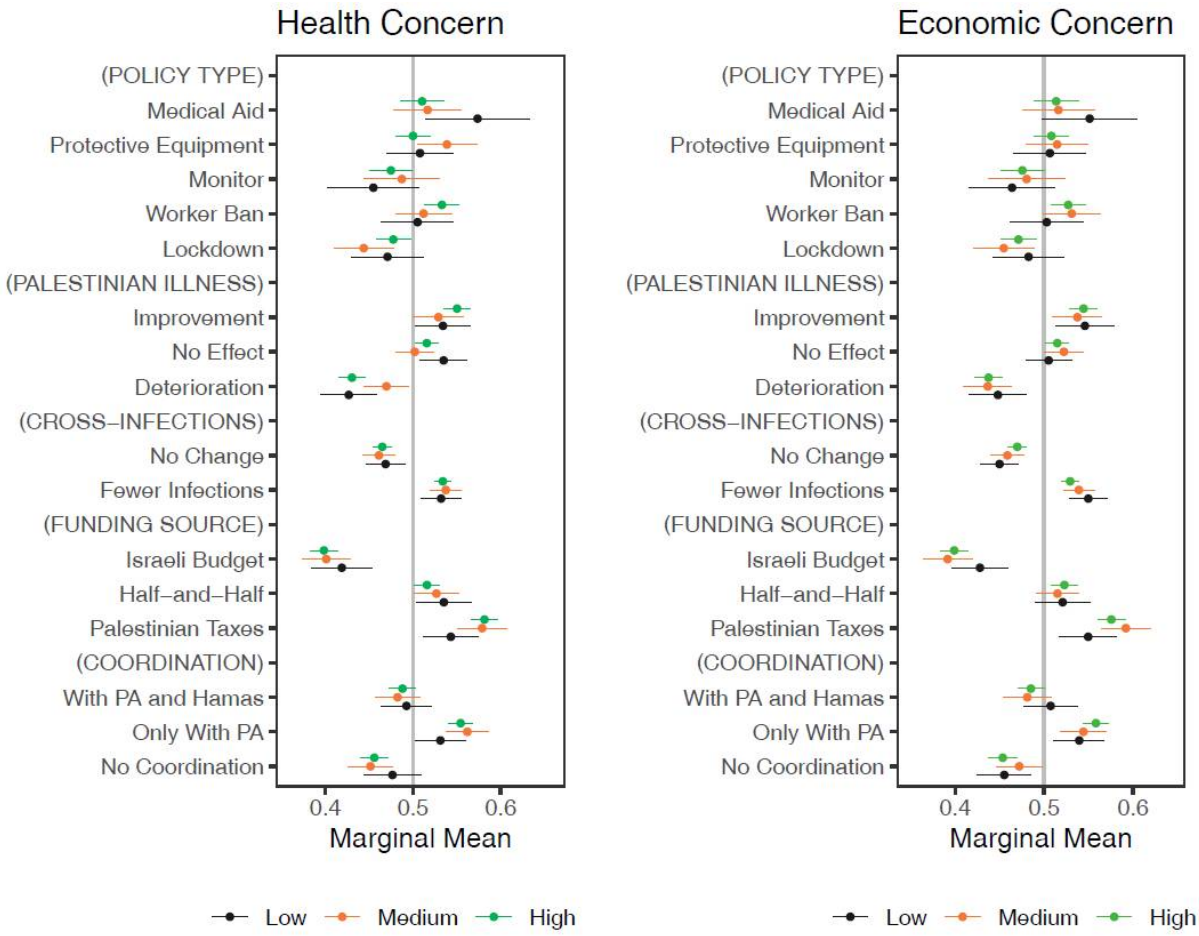

Figure 3. Marginal Means of Different Policy Attributes by Health and Economic COVID-19 Threat Perceptions

The dots and horizontal lines indicate point estimates with 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors clustered by respondent. Attribute titles are presented in all caps and parentheses.

possible interaction between threat perceptions and partisanship. Hence, the conjoint analysis, too, rejects the cooperation and hostility hypotheses.

If COVID-19 threat perceptions do not affect policy priorities, what does? Figure 4 plots the marginal means by left-right self-identification, which we collapse to Left, Center, and Right based on the original 7-point scale.[9] Consistent with the politics-as-usual hypothesis, we see clear differences in policy preferences by partisan ideology, supported statistically by an omnibus F-test ($F = 6.96$, $p < 0.001$). Leftist respondents are more likely to prefer humanitarian provision of medical aid and protective equipment and oppose aggressive policies involving military lockdowns and worker entry ban. Rightist voters, conversely, are less likely to support medical

[9] We cluster 1-3 as Left, 4 as Center, and 5-7 as Right.

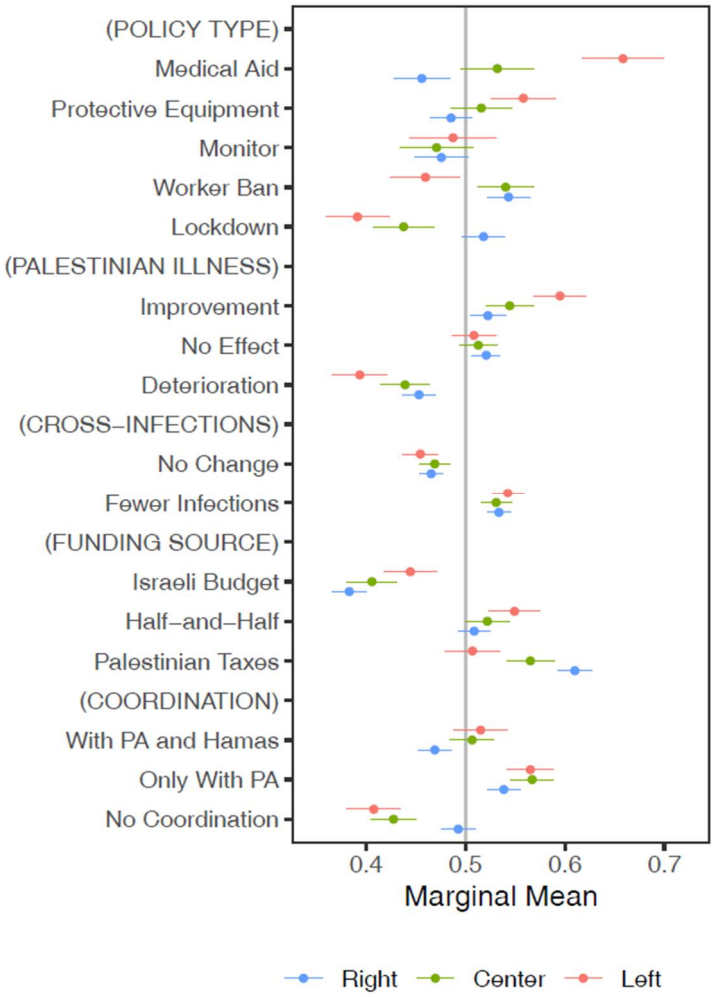

Figure 4. Marginal Means of Different Policy Attributes by Political Ideology
The dots and horizontal lines indicate point estimates with 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors clustered by respondent. Attribute titles are presented in all caps and parentheses.

aid, prefer an entry ban, and have no objection to military lockdowns. Centrists generally position in between.

Similar differences are found in attributes related to Palestinian wellbeing and coordination. Leftists are more likely to support policies that improve Palestinian illness and reject policies that exacerbate it. They also prefer splitting the costs to imposing them on the Palestinians and coordinating with the PA than not at all. Rightists, by contrast, are indifferent to improvement in Palestinian wellbeing, although they oppose policies that would worsen it. They are also more likely to prefer policies that impose all costs on the Palestinians and more strongly oppose coordination with Hamas. Centrists are closer to the left in preferences for coordination, closer to

the right in the preference to shift all costs to the Palestinians, and in between regarding Palestinian illness levels.

Nevertheless, the analysis also reveals aspects on which all ideological subgroups agree, even if at different magnitudes. All subgroups are likely to reject policies that worsen Palestinian illness, prioritize mitigation of infections into Israel, and prefer coordination only with the PA. In addition, all oppose using only Israeli funds. Hence, we can see the boundaries of Israeli Jews' ideological differences: leftists, too, seek to protect in-group resources, prioritize lowering infections into Israel, and are unexcited about collaborating with Hamas; and rightists, too, do not wish to actively worsen the pandemic on the Palestinian side and prefer coordination with moderate Palestinians. Overall, however, policy priorities reflect deep ideological disagreements on the conflict, corroborating the politics-as-usual argument.

Scope Conditions and Broader Lessons

How do the patterns found in our analysis inform the broader debate? The literature's mixed findings imply that contextual factors may play a central role in outcome variations. While a single case study cannot resolve cross-case heterogeneity, it outlines additional scope conditions that can inform past and future research about similar and different cases. Hence, while suggestive, we find it useful to briefly reflect on the structural attributes that may reinforce our results.

Two contextual aspects are particularly relevant: the structural attributes of the conflict and those of the external threat. Interstate and intrastate conflicts can differ by several traits, including longevity, intensity, power asymmetry, and territorial versus center-seeking goals. On these dimensions, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict stands out as a highly protracted territorial conflict with cyclical rounds of violence and significant military and economic asymmetry. Due to the conflict's longevity, members of both groups are socialized from a young age into their in-group's nationalist ethe, out-group stereotypes, and sense of intergroup threat (Bar-Tal 2013). This may help explain the rigidity of deep-seated dispositions toward the out-group even when facing a large-scale global threat. Moreover, the conflict's routine violence may also hinder empathy and de-escalation compared to calmer cases (Akcinaroglu et al. 2011). Why did these attributes not lead to greater tensions, however? One possibility is that the conflict's territorial nature, as opposed to center-seeking contentions, softens perceptions of intergroup competition over shared resources and of potential Palestinian challenges to the Israeli government amid the crisis. Another may be Israelis'

privileged position in the conflict, which may enable them to cognitively separate the crisis from the conflict's reality. Accordingly, it is equally important to examine the perceptions of weaker groups in asymmetric conflicts and the types of assistance that they would be willing to *accept* given external threats. An incongruence between the policy priorities of high-power and low-power groups can add further constraints when seeking to cooperate against collective challenges.

Our findings may also reflect the type of external threat. Joint exogenous threats can vary by their severity, longevity, pace, and risk distribution across rival groups. COVID-19 is a highly contagious and dangerous disease with a prolonged presence, a rapid infection rate, and continuous changes in pandemic patterns and viral variants. Contrary to sudden and brief natural disasters, these traits maintain high levels of anxiety and uncertainty—our data indicate no real decline in COVID-19 threat perceptions between April and October—that may keep attention inward to in-group protection at the expense of out-group empathy and collective recovery. The risk of COVID-19 infection, moreover, spreads relatively broadly across borders and groups, which may increase intergroup trust according to recent research on droughts (De Juan and Hänze 2021). However, the broader implications of COVID-19 also depend on access to healthcare, economic resources, and population density, all of which differ greatly between Israelis and Palestinians. These unequal conditions, therefore, may rather hinder Israelis' sense of shared fate with the Palestinians when facing the pandemic. Finally, COVID-19 spreads by interpersonal contact, lending particular importance to intergroup interaction levels. As noted, Israelis and Palestinians are systematically interconnected but are also segregated residentially. Our results, therefore, may emphasize the importance of the latter over the former.

Conclusion

Large-scale natural threats are becoming more ubiquitous in recent years, raising a greater need for collective action, particularly among rival groups in conflict. Nevertheless, we only have a partial understanding of popular support for intergroup assistance policies in conflictual settings faced with such threats. In this paper, we explored this question in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during COVID-19, a case study for a salient external threat shared by both sides in an active conflict. Specifically, we examined whether and how greater concern from COVID-19 affected the willingness of Israeli Jews to assist the Palestinians with the pandemic. Our study finds a null relationship: greater threat perceptions do not influence support for various intervention policies,

which remain dominated by longstanding partisan worldviews regardless of the shared danger. This outcome replicates across different measures, surveys, and policy dimensions.

Nevertheless, our results, and especially our novel focus on multidimensional policy preferences, helps to outline the priorities and tradeoffs underlying public preferences for collaboration. We find that Israeli Jews in the ideological Left, which is associated with support for territorial compromise, seek mutually beneficial solutions, whereas Israeli Jews on the hawkish right exhibit defensive perceptions of a zero-sum game. Yet we also see some common ground: leftists remain protective of Israeli interests and rightists do not seek to actively hurt the out-group. These findings indicate that both intergroup solidarity and out-group resentment have limits in such situations.

This insight is particularly important as we face a future with intensifying climate-related disasters and other global crises. These challenges require collective efforts that will inevitably confront territorial, ethnic, and other active conflicts. Our research indicates that such shared threats are insufficient to change existing conflictual dynamics on their own. Policymakers and advocates of collaborative action in conflictual regions must be mindful of this hurdle and work with and around conflict-related worldviews, in-group biases, and intragroup partisan camps. Accordingly, more research is needed on appropriate policy design and messaging that could soften these stances. In Israel, our findings imply that such actions can gain greater public support if they emphasize in-group interests, low or shared in-group costs, and collaboration only with moderates on the other side. While out-group wellbeing is a relatively minor consideration, avoiding harm is also important to most people.

Our analysis also carries legal and moral implications given Israel's military control over large parts of the Palestinian territories. According to the Fourth Geneva Convention, an occupying force is responsible for the occupied population's public health. However, we find this sense of duty missing from many Israeli Jews' policy preferences during the pandemic. Indeed, the internal ideological cleavage underlying our findings also polarizes opinions about whether Israel's control constitutes an occupation. According to a Peace Index survey from May 2017, just 35% of Israeli Jews, most of whom vote Left, think or are certain that it can be defined as such. Thus, existing intragroup divides about the conflict extend from policy preferences to deeper perceptions of legal and moral obligations to assist weaker groups under a shared threat. Further research on these perceptions is warranted as part of the growing debate about collective action in conflicts facing

such joint challenges. With recent global changes, confronting these collective problems may prove to be one of the most important political challenges of our times.

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