

UC SANTA BARBARA

Department of Political Science

Comparative Politics & Political Economy Webinar Series

OCT
28



Thursday, 10/28 | 12:30 to 1:30pm

Ron Hassner

**PERSUASIVE AND UNPERSUASIVE
CRITIQUES OF TORTURE**

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Abstract: Torture critics have offered two types of arguments in the hope of swaying public opinion against torture: A pragmatic (consequentialist) argument that “torture doesn’t work” and a moral (deontological) argument about the immorality and cruelty of torture. This paper presents findings from two survey experiments about public support for torture among U.S. adults. The great majority of the respondents in these surveys did not endorse pragmatic arguments. They believed that torture was a quick and effective means of extracting information from detainees who had information about terror attacks. Respondents were unpersuaded by the suggestion that evidence extracted by means of torture might be fragmentary, outdated, or merely corroborative. However, when respondents were informed about the protracted nature of torture, which often requires weeks or months of interrogation before yielding results, their support for torture was lower by 14% in one survey and by 30% in a second survey. Survey participants refused to endorse prolonged torture not because they perceived torture to be ineffective but because they felt that prolonged torture was cruel. Torture critics would be well advised to steer away from less persuasive arguments about torture inefficacy and instead confront audiences with sobering truths about the cruelty of torture.

Bio: Ron Hassner is the Chancellor's Professor of Political Science and Helen Diller Family Chair in Israel Studies at the University of California Berkeley. He is also the faculty director of the Berkeley Institute for Jewish Law and Israel Studies and is the editor of the Cornell University Press book series “Religion and Conflict.” Prof. Hassner studies the role of ideas, practices, and symbols in international security with particular attention to the relationship between religion and violence.