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Dilemmas of Divorce: How Secessionist Identities Cut Both Ways

STEPHEN M. SAIDEMAN, BETH K. DOUGHERTY,
and ERIN K. JENNE

Secessionist groups, if they are to achieve their goal of independence, require both domestic and international support, although neither is easy to obtain. One strategy that such groups may pursue is the use of their identity to gain support both at home and abroad. What causes leaders of a secessionist movement to focus on one identity over another and why do these identities change over time? How much flexibility do elites have in making these choices? This article explores the ways in which latent identities simultaneously constrain and empower secessionist groups in achieving their political ambitions. We argue that the leaders of such groups engage in “identity layering” to achieve statehood for their region. Two cases, the Eritrean and Macedonian secessionist movements, are used to illustrate both the logic of identity layering and the dilemmas it entails. The central argument is that the configuration of constraints in each case largely determines the identities that are selected and layered onto the group in question. The use of such identities may also generate resistance—from within the secessionist entity or from outside—which in turn creates incentives for identity change. This analysis shows, first, that territorial identities (as opposed to ethnic or ideological ones) tend to serve as the group’s primary mobilizational base, and second, that domestic imperatives weigh more heavily than international pressures in determining the success of these choices.

Stephen M. Saideman is Canada Research Chair in International Security and Ethnic Conflict and Associate Professor of Political Science at McGill University. Beth K. Dougherty is Associate Professor and Manger Family Professor of International Relations at Beloit College. Erin K. Jenne is Assistant Professor of International Relations and European Studies at Central European University.

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Since the end of the cold war, secessionist conflict and attendant state collapse have figured prominently on the foreign policy agendas of the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the European Union as serious challenges to regional security in eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere. The effects of recent and ongoing conflicts in Aceh, Bosnia, Chechnya, East Timor, Kashmir, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro testify to the sustained force of self-determination on the world stage. Much of the work on secessionism and ethnic conflict has focused on how to resolve such disputes.¹ Relatively less attention has been focused on how nonstate actors surmount the considerable domestic and international barriers to achieve statehood.² The periodic success of these struggles is even more puzzling when one considers the resistance they usually face from their powerful state governments.

This article explores one potent resource used by elites and their organizations as they try to gain independence and recognition: their proclaimed identity. Leaders mobilize on and advertise collective identities in order to gain support.³ In other words, secessionist elites choose their identities with the aim of getting actors in both domestic and international arenas to care about and actively assist their efforts. Although there are almost always internal disagreements over the movement's optimal stance and strategies—including the selection of the group's identity—there is usually a single overarching (even if multilayered) identity associated with the movement at each point in time. The question then becomes, What drives these changes in the separatist entity's identity over time?

¹ See, for example, Jarat Chopra and Thomas G. Weiss, "Prospects for Containing Conflict in the Former Second World," *Security Studies* 4, no. 3 (spring 1995): 552–83; Frank Harvey, "Deterrence and Ethnic Conflict: The Case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1993–1994," *Security Studies* 6, no. 3 (spring 1997): 180–210; Chaim Kaufmann, "Intervention in Ethnic and Ideological Civil Wars," *Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (autumn 1996): 62–104; Chaim Kaufmann, "Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars," *International Security* 20, no. 4 (spring 1996): 136–75; Stephen John Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," *International Security* 22, no. 2 (autumn 1997): 5–53; Barbara F. Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement," *International Organization* 51, no. 3 (summer 1997): 335–64; Barbara F. Walter, "Designing Transitions from Civil War: Demobilization, Democratization, and Commitments to Peace," *International Security* 24, no. 1 (summer 1999): 127–55; Nicholas Sambanis, "Partition as a Solution to Ethnic War," *World Politics* 52, no. 4 (July 2000): 437–83; and Ian S. Lustick, Dan Miodownik, and Roy J. Eidelson, "Secessionism in Multicultural States: Does Sharing Power Prevent or Encourage It?" *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 2 (May 2004): 209–29.

² For clarity, the term "host state" refers to the state from which a secessionist movement is attempting to secede.

³ Lars-Erik Cederman uses agent-based modeling and complexity theory to understand the emergence of nationalist mobilization and coordination, and he takes an evolutionary perspective to understand why some identities emerge over time rather than others. Lars-Erik Cederman, *Emergent Actors in World Politics: How States and Nations Develop and Dissolve* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). We do not directly address his argument here, as he focuses most directly on the dynamics between the center (the host government) and the periphery (the potential secessionist movement), whereas we are most concerned with the possible trade-offs between the domestic audience (the people of the seceding territory) and the international audience (potential external supporters).

Answers to such questions will provide insights both for the theoretical understanding of identity politics and for more practical policy concerns. Over the past fifteen years, scholarly interest in collective identity formation and its impact on foreign policy has grown substantially. From Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane's work on ideas and foreign policy to volumes edited by Peter Katzenstein and Michael Barnett and Shibley Telhami, a growing body of work has focused on the nature of identity construction in international relations.⁴ Inspired by the constructivist turn in international relations, much of this scholarship has focused on the determinants of state identity and how these identities influence the state's foreign policy choices.⁵ Meanwhile, there has been a parallel surge of interest in the identity politics of ethnic groups. Some scholars have explored the strategic component of ethnic identification and its consequences for intergroup dynamics.⁶ Interestingly, there has been less apparent interest in the specific ways in which groups, like states, alter or change their identities as a function of domestic and international pressures—much less how these choices relate to secessionist struggles. This article will argue that collective identities are consciously and strategically added to, and subtracted from, a movement's identity profile over time—a process we will call “identity layering”—and will explore the causes and effects of such identity layering in secessionist movements.

In setting forth this argument, this article asks the following questions: Why does the salience of particular identities wax and wane over the course of separatist movements? Which kinds of identities tend to matter most? In addressing these questions, we identify a series of variables to help explain curious patterns in identity change that recur across cases.

Before proceeding further, a few words should be said about our guiding assumptions. First, rather than treat ethnic groups as unitary actors, we acknowledge the existence of multiple organizations (parties, fronts, and so on) that compete for the support of their ethnic constituency. We assume that the leaders of these factions will act to maximize this support; if they fail to do so, we expect that they will lose power to another set of elites who are more effective in mobilizing this constituency. We therefore focus in particular on

⁴ Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Michael Barnett and Shibley Telhami, eds., *Communal Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

⁵ Katzenstein, *Culture of National Security*.

⁶ See for example, Susan Olzak, *The Dynamics of Ethnic Competition and Conflict* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Explaining Interethnic Cooperation,” *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 4 (November 1996): 715–35; James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity,” *International Organization* 54, no. 4 (fall 2000): 845–77; and Jack Snyder and Karen Ballentine, “Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas,” *International Security* 21, no. 2 (fall 1996): 15–40.

the choices made by individuals who enjoy a central position in the movement at each point in time. In doing so, we hope to capture changes in the movement's core strategies over time. As noted above, the selection and advertisement of group identities serve as one such instrument for maximizing support for independence movements.⁷ Entrepreneurs may try to increase the salience of an identity—territorial, communal, or ideological—in order to gain domestic or international support for their own band of secessionists. The central task of this article is to analyze these identity choices. Secondly, we examine how each movement's chosen identity (or identities) plays before internal and external audiences and with what consequences for their independence projects.

We should also note that the idea that ethnic elites select identities instrumentally runs counter to a widely held assumption in the popular press that identities are relatively fixed and that certain identities are nearly always more powerful than others. Although most scholars of ethnic conflict have moved beyond the crude debate between those who see identities as unchanging and those who argue that identities are perfectly fluid, primordialist or essentialist arguments still hold considerable sway in prevailing understandings of conflict.⁸ Two of their most prominent proponents are Robert Kaplan and Samuel Huntington, who argue that identities play a causal role in communal conflicts around the world.⁹ Huntington considers religion to be a key component of civilizational identity, trumping more local and divisive identities. These arguments are not trivial, as they have shaped public debates and policy. President Bill Clinton is said to have read Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*, which persuaded him that intervention in Bosnia would be futile.¹⁰

⁷ Certainly leaders can try to buy this support with looted resources or other material endowments. These resources are usually finite, however, so nonmonetary appeals are often made as well. Also, as a reviewer reminded us, groups can get support from the enemies of the host state, such as Iran and Iraq assisting each other's Kurdish groups.

⁸ For examples of the view of identities as unchanging, see Clifford Geertz, "The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States," in *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, ed. Clifford Geertz (London: Free Press, 1963); and Daniele Conversi, ed., *Ethnonationalism in the Contemporary World: Walker Connor and the Study of Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 2002). For examples of instrumentalism where identities are quite fluid, see Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi: Sage, 1991); and v. p. Gagnon, "Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict: The Case of Serbia," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (winter 1994–95): 130–66. We follow a moderate position, such as that taken by Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985); David D. Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change among the Yoruba* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); and Joseph Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Framework* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), that multiple ethnic identities co-exist and that the salience of any particular identity over another is determined by the political or social context.

⁹ Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993); Robert D. Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy* (New York: Random House, 2000); and Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

¹⁰ David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton, and the Generals* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002).

Chaim Kaufmann has argued that partition is probably the best solution for deeply entrenched ethnic conflicts, as communal cleavages are virtually unbridgeable after violent sectarian warfare.¹¹ From this perspective, one potential objection to a theory of strategic layering is that, under certain circumstances, ethnic identities may become virtually fixed. In such cases, politicians can be expected to have very little influence on identity formation and change.¹²

Alternatively, one could argue that identity is profoundly malleable and that groups can and do change their identities in order to obtain international support for their cause. The logic of this largely realist account is that, for any entity trying to become a state, its external audience will trump internal considerations, as state recognition can be conferred upon the entity only by other states. That is, when facing the choice between appealing to domestic and international audiences, secessionist movements should choose that identity that appeals to the most powerful external actors, since they have the greatest capacity to alter the internal balance of power. The above logic leads to two hypotheses that compete with our own: first, that group identity cannot be strategically manipulated, and second, that groups change their identities in response to international pressures.

This article will first consider why identities are useful for secessionist movements in obtaining both domestic and international support. It then will examine the different kinds of identities that secessionist entities have at their disposal, before addressing common constraints on these choices and developing hypotheses concerning the conditions under which one type of identity is likely to be chosen over another. The explanatory power of the “identity layering” model will be tested using the cases of Eritrean and Macedonian secessionist movements. The article concludes with policy implications and suggestions for extending the model.

GETTING BY WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM FRIENDS

Secessionist entities often require both domestic and international support in order to overcome resistance from their host governments. Without domestic support, group leaders would not be able to win elections, engage in peaceful protest, nor launch a viable insurgency. Numbers matter in any bid for independence; movements with fewer supporters are less likely to succeed than those with a wider base of support. Violent insurgencies do not

¹¹ Kaufmann, “Intervention in Ethnic and Ideological Civil Wars”; and Kaufmann, “Possible and Impossible Solutions.”

¹² One study that seriously considers the possibilities of altering identities is Daniel Byman, “Forever Enemies? The Manipulation of Ethnic Identities to End Ethnic Wars,” *Security Studies* 9, no. 3 (spring 2000): 149–90.

necessarily require a huge number of fighters, but they do need sufficient popular support to ensure regular supplies of food, shelter, and funding for resistance fighters. More important than size, secessionist groups must usually be territorially concentrated.¹³ Since secessionist movements are based on territorial claims, their leaders must demonstrate that they enjoy the support of the inhabitants of their claimed territory in order to establish the popular basis of these demands. Moreover, a secure territorial base is vital to most grassroots insurgencies.

External support (or at least lack of resistance) is also essential to the success of such movements.¹⁴ Many have noted that secessionist groups require international support to achieve statehood, except in rare cases such as Slovakia, where the host state allowed the region to leave peacefully. According to Donald Horowitz, “Whether a secessionist movement will achieve its aims . . . is determined largely by international politics, by the balance of interests and forces beyond the state.”¹⁵ Yet what do outside actors stand to gain from such assistance? Siding with a secessionist group would seem an unwise gamble, since such movements almost always end in failure. Although secessionist leaders may try to tempt potential supporters with promises of future access to valuable land in their region, the host state can outbid the group due to the government’s greater odds of prevailing in an armed struggle. For example, although Biafran separatists could offer external actors access to Biafran oil in return for assistance, the Nigerian government could make the same offer, which could be fulfilled once it put down the regional rebellion. From a strictly utilitarian perspective, therefore, external actors should lend support to the party most likely to win the secessionist conflict. Because most secessionist movements can be expected to lose, external patrons should generally stay out of the conflict or support the host state.¹⁶

Nevertheless, secessionist leaders do manage to attract international assistance.¹⁷ The question therefore remains, How do secessionists attract

¹³ James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (February 2003): 75–90; and Monica Duffy Toft, *The Geography of Ethnic Violence: Identity, Interests, and the Indivisibility of Territory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹⁴ Indeed, some groups may be largely or entirely the creation of an outside actor or a set of external supporters. For these, our argument cannot really apply, as our model assumes that the elites running these movements have some autonomy. For a discussion of the vital importance of external assistance to minority separatism, see Erin Jenne, “A Bargaining Theory of Minority Demands: Explaining the Dog That Didn’t Bite in 1990s Yugoslavia,” *International Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (December 2004): 729–54.

¹⁵ Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 230.

¹⁶ Secessionists must be wary of dependence on external assistance, as outside actors typically have their own motives for intervention that do not relate to the minority’s welfare. As a result, a minority group may sometimes be abandoned by its outside patrons. For example, Iran dropped its support for the Kurdish separatists in Iraq in 1975; similarly, the Kurds in Iraq have at various times been deserted by their Western (mainly U.S.) supporters and have endured mass reprisals as a consequence. Still, because foreign support is so valuable, secessionists may be willing to take these risks.

¹⁷ Stephen M Saideman, *The Ties That Divide: Ethnic Politics, Foreign Policy, and International Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

external support? Perhaps outside actors provide assistance to a movement when it is perceived to be friendly to their interests; such perceptions might be driven by the group's history of relations with the center or with external patrons.¹⁸ What if the group's record of prior behavior is ambiguous or non-existent? In such cases, the movement's proclaimed identity may serve to signal whether the group is "one of us" rather than "one of them," indicating, respectively, whom the group will reward and whom it will punish if it attains victory.¹⁹ Potential supporters use these proclamations as signals in calculating whether the movement's organizers are allies or adversaries.²⁰ Knowing this, the leadership will select those identities that maximize the likelihood of external assistance while minimizing the risk to its domestic base of support.²¹

Identity Selection: Dual Opportunities and Constraints

Since multiple collective identities exist at both the state and substate level, secessionist leaders have some latitude in establishing the mobilizational basis of their movement. They will not be able to mobilize on any and every identity, however. Secessionists face important constraints in identity selection, primary among which are the prior cultural and ethnic makeup of the people who reside in the claimed territory. Thus, a movement's leaders must choose those symbols, myths, practices, and traditions that resonate broadly with their popular base.²² Apart from these restrictions, however, the leaders of such movements still enjoy a range of options. How do they choose among those options? Before addressing this question, it is worth exploring the three main categories of identities that are used in secessionist bids: territorial, communal, and ideological identities.

¹⁸ For instance, Russia's reaction to Armenia and Azerbaijan was influenced not by their identities, but by their actual behavior, Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1998). Of course, given the various identities in play in this particular conflict, none were likely to shape Moscow's attitudes or appeal to the Russian populace, except perhaps enmity towards the Muslim Azeris.

¹⁹ For an excellent discussion of the logic of ethnic group formation, see Russell Hardin, *One For All: The Logic of Group Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

²⁰ To be clear, the identities in play may not matter for all potential interveners. For example, identifying a struggle as one between Christians and Muslims will not resonate in countries where Buddhism is the dominant religion of elites and their constituencies.

²¹ It should be noted here that external actors may intervene in a variety of ways, taking either or both sides of the conflict for many different reasons. This article focuses on just one strategy used by secessionist leaders to attract and maintain domestic and international support; the special focus on the strategic use of identity is warranted, we argue, due to the important role identities have been shown to play in past secessionist conflicts. See Saideman, *Ties That Divide*.

²² See Stuart Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), for an excellent analysis of the roles played by symbolic myths and manipulative elites in ethnic conflict.

TERRITORIAL IDENTITIES

A territorial identity is defined as a bond based on common residence within a particular region that is distinct from the core. This “homeland” identity is significant because secessionists need first and foremost a territory they can claim as their own before they can legitimately call for territorial self-determination. Establishing a territorial base is probably the most important strategic consideration for a movement’s organizers. If the seceding group cannot distinguish itself from the host state, it will not be seen as a legitimate “self” in need of “determination.” If the chosen identity does match up with the claimed territory, on the other hand, it is more likely to appear legitimate in the eyes of both domestic and international audiences.

23 The territory’s ethnic makeup may influence the importance of this identity as well. When the territory is dominated by a single ethnic group, a salient territorial identity is less important for obtaining the support of its inhabitants. For instance, since Bengalis clearly represented nearly all the residents of East Pakistan, Bengali secessionists had no need to play up their East Pakistani (territorial) identity.²³ Where the territory is ethnically heterogeneous, however, a salient territorial identity is absolutely vital. The Biafra region, for example, contains several ethnic groups in addition to the dominant Ibo minority; consequently, the Biafran territorial identity loomed large in their drive for secession.

COMMUNAL IDENTITIES

24 Communal identities are “tribal” allegiances that determine membership in a politically active social unit—be it racial, religious, linguistic, regional, or cultural.²⁴ What distinguishes these identities from territorial identities is that they tend to be ascriptive, in the sense that membership in communal groups is based on descent.²⁵ To illustrate, a person is Serbian if one’s mother and
25 father are Serbian. Although “Serbian-ness” is not encoded in one’s DNA, it is widely seen to be. The same holds true for clan or religious identities, insofar as these identities are “passed down” from one generation to the next. Due to strict membership rules, communal identities are far less malleable than, say, territorial identities. For example, I may be able to identify myself as biracial,

²³ For a recent and insightful discussion of the impact of cultural geography—group size—on identification, see Daniel N. Posner, “The Political Salience of Cultural Difference: Why Chewas and Tumbukas Are Allies in Zambia and Adversaries in Malawi,” *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 4 (November 2004): 529–45.

²⁴ We do not assume or investigate here whether one kind of communal identity—say, religion—is inherently more useful than others. Quantitative work (such as Saideman, *Ties That Divide*) shows that no specific communal cleavage seems to attract significantly more international support. Indeed, as the cases suggest, each kind of identity presents advantages and disadvantages.

²⁵ Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*.

white, or Asian if my mother and father are white and Asian, respectively, but I may not identify myself as black. In contrast, one's territorial identity may, in theory, change as often as one changes one's place of residence. The "tribal," ascriptive nature of communal identities makes them ideal mobilizational tools for collective action. Secessionist leaders can use these identities both to highlight cleavages between the group and its host state and to distinguish between allies and adversaries in cases of sectarian conflict. Due to their quasi-permanent nature, communal identities are often deeply felt and thus also serve as powerful motivational bases for engaging in costly conflict with "the other."

Communal identities often overlap in concentric circles, moving outward from family to clan to ethnic group to nation. The composition of the leadership of the movement partly determines the movement's choice of communal identity. If the organizers originate from a single ethnic group, it may be difficult to attract support from outside this narrow base. If the movement's founders hail, for example, from many linguistic groups that nonetheless share the same religion, they will probably identify on the basis of religion. External constraints and opportunities also inform the leadership's choices. If external support is perceived to be necessary to the success of the secessionist movement, its leaders may emphasize a common transnational identity. Such appeals can be made to states or groups, or both. Diaspora groups can provide a great deal of support to separatist organizations, including arms, personnel, and finance, as well as lobbying power on both the international and the national level.²⁶

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IDEOLOGICAL IDENTITIES

Sometimes communal identities are poor choices for mobilizing a secessionist movement. This may be because there is no widely shared identity among the inhabitants of the claimed territory or because the identity fails to distinguish the seceding group from the host state. In such cases, political entrepreneurs may choose to play up their ideological identity. Ideological identities are far more malleable than either territorial or communal identities, because ideological membership is based on neither location nor descent, but rather voluntary political choice.²⁷ To illustrate, one may choose to join a communist organization at $t = 0$ and leave the organization at $t = 1$ to reintegrate into the wider society.

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²⁶ Charles King and Neil J. Melvin, "Diaspora Politics: Ethnic Linkages, Foreign Policy, and Security in Eurasia," *International Security* 24, no. 3 (winter 1999–2000): 108–38; and Yossi Shain and Andrew Barth, "Diasporas and International Relations Theory," *International Organization* 57, no. 3 (summer 2003): 449–79.

²⁷ Although Kaufmann may overstate the permanence of ethnic identities and ideology's less-fixed quality, this contrast is important. See note 11.

The mobilizational advantages of ideological identities are threefold. First, if the movement's organizers have a relatively narrow base of support, an ideological identity will help them overcome or sidestep ethnic divides. Second, ideological identities are broad enough to appeal to actors across state borders; thus they have the potential to attract external patrons without necessarily diminishing their domestic support. Third, ideological identities can be readily superimposed (or layered) onto both communal and territorial identities. They therefore serve as a tool for attracting additional international and domestic allies—adding to, without subtracting from, the movement's base of support. During the cold war, for example, many separatist groups identified themselves as Marxist-Leninist in order to gain material and strategic assistance from the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba. In the postcommunist period, Croatia tried to play it both ways, identifying as both Catholic and democratic in an attempt to gain the support of both sectarian and secular societies in Europe and in North America.

The problem with identity selection—as always—is that once one identifies who one is, one is also identifying who one is not. When a secessionist entity and its host government align themselves along an identity cleavage, this cleavage determines the lines of not only civil conflict, but also (potentially) a wider regional war. As a secessionist resource, identity selection is therefore a dual-edged sword, helping the movement gather momentum but also endangering its chances for success. The next section examines how secessionist identity selection operates in the context of this bind.

Difficult Choices: The Lowest Common Denominator Rules

It follows from the discussion above that group identities are (imperfectly) malleable. Secessionist leaders will try to change their identity (or raise the salience of another identity) when they perceive that the mobilizational value of their existing identity is outweighed by that of an alternative. At every point in time, then, secessionist leaders are compelled to use the identity that they perceive best (1) unifies the residents of the claimed territory around demands for self-determination, (2) mobilizes popular resistance against the host government, and (3) maximizes their leverage against the center while minimizing international resistance. For the reasons outlined above, the starting point for a secessionist movement is likely to be its territorial identity. Because there is usually competition for dominance within the movement, competing elites might then be tempted to “ethnically outbid” one another by layering on a communal identity.²⁸ The leadership may also be tempted

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²⁸ See Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth A. Shepsle, *Politicians in Plural Societies: A Theory of Democratic Instability* (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1972); Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*; and Rothchild, *Ethnopolitics*.

to adopt a transnational identity in order to gain external assistance for their movement.

These temptations may lead a group to take on an additional communal or ideological identity, which can create problems for the movement. If communal identities do not neatly overlap with the territory's population (which is usually the case), divisions may emerge within the movement's organizational structure. In such situations, we expect a movement either to (1) return to a territorial-based identity after a period of internal contestation, or (2) fail in its secessionist struggle. The sections below address why such movements tend to move away from, and later return to, a simple territorial identity.

DOMESTIC DYNAMICS AND IDENTITIES

At the outset of a secessionist drive, the movement's leaders must choose the identity that will define both the lines of conflict and the movement's goals. As noted earlier, a territorial identity is nearly always a prerequisite for successful movements of self-determination, due to the need for a demonstrated backward link between the "people" and the territory that is claimed for self-government. Indeed, some territorial identity must already exist before the residents of the territory can even conceive of themselves as a "people" that can legitimately seek self-determination. A group's default territorial identity is a latent regional or republican identity (with boundaries) that has been conferred on the group by a previous government or external power. Territorial identities serve as ideal mobilizational devices for secessionist movements because they simultaneously unite domestic support (1) for a claim of independence and (2) against the host state's competing claim of sovereignty over the territory in question. Such identities also tend to be uniformly diffused throughout the population; in some cases, there are even regional political institutions that can be transformed into state institutions. Examples include the republican identities that undergirded the secessionist drives that broke apart the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.²⁹ Territorial identities thus generally serve as the group's primary mobilizational identity—a kind of precondition for any serious bid for independence.³⁰

²⁹ This is one of the reasons why Philip G. Roeder, "Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization," *World Politics* 43, no. 2 (January 1991): 196–232; Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: Norton, 2000); Svante E. Cornell, "Autonomy as a Source of Conflict: Caucasian Conflicts in Theoretical Perspective," *World Politics* 54, no. 2 (January 2002): 245–76; and Henry Hale, "Divided We Stand: Ethnofederalism as Problem and Solution in Divided Societies," *World Politics* 56, no. 2 (January 2004): 165–93, among others, view federalism in ethnically divided states as very problematic.

³⁰ Territory and related identities are more important to secessionist efforts than to irredentist movements, whose existence and fate depend largely on communal ties to a mother country. For differences between secessionist and irredentist groups, see Stephen M. Saideman and R. William Ayres, "Determining the Sources of Irredentism: Logit Analyses of Minorities at Risk Data," *Journal of Politics* 62, no. 4 (November 2000): 1126–44.

Pressures at the domestic level, the international level, or both may induce the leaders of secessionist movements to move beyond the group's default identities. In the course of a secessionist bid, multiple entities (parties, organizations, et al.) may emerge to represent part or all of a seceding group. In many cases, elites compete for dominance by proclaiming themselves the best defender of the group's interests—initiating a cycle of “ethnic outbidding” that radicalizes the entire community.³¹ Politicians thereby increase communal divisiveness by making promises that benefit one group at the expense of others. This dynamic may be exacerbated if the host state uses violence against members of the group, lending credibility to claims of discrimination or genocidal intent. This may even serve as the initial impetus for the secessionist effort.³² Although this dynamic makes sense from the standpoint of individual leaders—in that it is rational to try to outbid one's rivals to obtain public office or political power—it may work against the collective goals of the secessionist movement by alienating potential allies.

There are other reasons an organization may choose to adopt a communal identity. If the host state uses violence to put down the resistance, then the organizers of the secessionist movement may require additional mobilizational resources to defend against these attacks. A territorial identity alone may be insufficient for this task, for it often fails to provide a compelling motivation for group members to engage in active resistance, which involves significant personal, social, and economic losses—including the possibility of death. Put another way, although territorial identities signify ownership of place that is unique and separate from the state, such identities may not serve as an adequate justification to fight and die for that place. A communal identity may therefore be overlaid on the group's territorial identity to give the resistance against the center some shape and purpose. Communal identities may also serve to highlight the cleavage between the group and the host state, lending greater legitimacy to the independence movement.

INTERNATIONAL PRESSURES

The second set of motivations for identity layering is external. The goal of most secessionist movements is formal induction into the international state system. Outside actors may sometimes expedite this process, as Germany did for Croatia and Slovenia in 1991.³³ The general practice, however, is

³¹ See note 28.

³² Stephen M. Saideman, “Is Pandora's Box Half-Empty or Half-Full? The Limited Virulence of Secession and the Domestic Sources of Disintegration,” in *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion, Escalation*, ed. David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 127–50.

³³ Beverly Crawford, “Explaining Defection from International Cooperation: Germany's Unilateral Recognition of Croatia,” *World Politics* 48, no. 4 (July 1996): 482–521.

that statehood is not conferred on a secessionist entity by the international community until it has already demonstrated prior acceptance by (1) its own residents and (2) its prior host government. Having surmounted these hurdles, the group's leaders must then obtain recognition by other states as a full-fledged member of the interstate system. If they succeed in doing so, the process of induction (and secession) is complete. If not, the fledgling state must change its strategy (which may involve selecting a new identity) until it succeeds in obtaining this approval. This process is, as mentioned above, a dual-edged sword—additional identities often attract support from some external actors while generating resistance from others.

Narrow communal identities are unlikely to attract significant outside support, as they are unlikely to have transnational appeal. If Hungarians in Romania sought to secede from Romania, for example, playing up their Hungarian ethnicity would at best draw Hungary into the fray. This may make sense if the group has irredentist intentions (seeking reunion with external national homelands), but not if the group has purely secessionist intentions. In contrast, wider communal identities—such as race or religion—are likely to appeal to powerful constituencies in many states. The Muslim Moros in the Catholic-dominated Philippines have been able to attract support from Libya and other Islamic states (and more recently, from al Qaeda) in their insurgency against the Philippine government. Indeed, one of the reasons the Yugoslav breakup was so protracted was that each combatant group played up its religious identity, successfully drawing in external patrons and thereby prolonging the conflict.³⁴

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Sometimes, however, communal identities fail to distinguish the secessionist group from its host state or they fail to attract external assistance. To illustrate, a predominantly Sunni Muslim group seceding from a predominantly Sunni Muslim state (such as Somaliland from Somalia) is unlikely to obtain outside support on the basis of its religious identity, since it is shared by both sides of the conflict. Alternatively, communal identities may be so localized that they fail to resonate with outside actors—as in the case of clan identities in Somalia. In such cases, the group may instead overlay their territorial identity with an ideological identity, such as Marxism-Leninism or Maoism. During the cold war, ideological identities were especially useful in attracting the support of the United States or the Soviet Union.

Finally, secessionist leaders may adopt a Janus-faced identity, with one face for international audiences and another for domestic constituents. This balancing act is difficult to sustain, however, as neither audience is blind to what is going on in the other arena.

³⁴ Saideman, *Ties That Divide*, chap. 5.

DIFFICULT TRADE-OFFS

The big question for the seceding group is whether the layered territorial + communal or ideological identity both mobilizes sufficient domestic support within the territory for which the claim is waged and attracts vital external support from outside the host state's borders. As we will see, there is often a trade-off between the two, and the externalities of these choices are likely to change over time as a function of changing international, social, and economic conditions. The identity that mobilizes maximal support on the domestic level may not attract external assistance (as, for example, when the identity is localized). Alternatively, identities that appeal to outside patrons may alienate many of the regional inhabitants. To be successful, secessionists must ensure that their identity maximizes external support while minimizing domestic fractiousness at every point in time. Successful examples include the Bosnian Muslims, who overlaid their territorial identity (Bosnian) with an ethnic identity (Muslim) as a means of appealing to Muslim countries. Similarly, the secessionist Trans-Dniestrans overlaid their territorial identity with a communal one (Russophone) as a means of attracting support from Russia.

At some point, however, the group's chosen identity structure may no longer maintain the optimal internal and external power balance necessary for successful resistance. Its leaders may therefore shed a layer, as many seceding groups did after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. Indeed, the end of the cold war undermined the value of ideological identities as devices for attracting external sources of support. Secessionist movements around the world responded to these events by discarding their ideological identities. Examples include the Kurds of Turkey, Moros in the Phillipines, the Assamese and Tripuras in India, and the West Papuans and Acehnese in Indonesia. Secessionist leaders, in order to increase their chances of success, continually reassess the viability of their identity structure in terms of whether it maximizes external support while minimizing internal divisiveness. Organizations that fail to make such adjustments risk defeat.

In relatively homogeneous regions, secessionist groups may use both (or either) territorial and communal identities with little trouble. Such groups face few of the trade-offs outlined above, since widely shared communal identities are unlikely to alienate local constituents. In the event that these identities meet with external resistance, the movement's leadership may play down its communal identity before international audiences. For secessionist movements in heterogeneous regions, however, such trade-offs are considerable.

³⁵ In such cases, domestic support is more important to a movement's success than international support, particularly in an insurgency's final stages. Insur-

³⁵ Most secessionist movements, including most of the post-Soviet cases and nearly all of the Yugoslav cases (with the exception of Slovenia), originate in heterogeneous regions.

gencies can survive, and even thrive, with very little international assistance. In contrast, any viable secessionist effort requires widespread local support.³⁶ 36 Therefore, although secessionist movements in heterogeneous regions may be tempted to layer on communal or ideological identities in order to attract outside patrons, they must generally revert to their base territorial identities in order to bridge communal divides in preparation for independence.

CASE STUDIES

We have chosen to examine two very different cases of secessionism in order to test for the predicted commonalities in identity selection across cases.³⁷ Using John Stuart Mill's method of agreement, we compare two secessionist movements that are different in most important respects, allowing us to rule out these characteristics as possible causes of similarities in their patterns of identity selection.³⁸ This will serve as an initial test of the explanatory scope of the identity-layering model both over time and across space. 37 38

The two cases presented here are the Eritrean independence movement from 1961 to 1991 and the Macedonian independence movement from 1989 to 1995. Consistent with the criteria of the method of agreement, this case selection yields variation in time, space, and mode of secession, allowing us to determine whether there are similar dynamics at work in two very different cases. The Eritrean movement took place outside Europe during the cold war, whereas the Macedonian movement was almost entirely a post-cold war event within the former Eastern bloc. The two cases also differ in their modes of secession. Eritrea's effort was long and bloody, but international recognition came easily once Ethiopia was defeated.³⁹ Macedonia's path to secession, in contrast, was abbreviated and nonviolent (although contested). 39 Its quest for recognition once it had achieved de facto secession, however, took considerably longer.

The two movements serve as ideal test cases of the model for several reasons. First, they meet the scope conditions of the theory, since the leaders of both secessionist entities engaged in protracted campaigns—first for

³⁶ A recent piece that considers the importance of the sea in which the insurgent fish swim is Benjamin Valentino, Paul Huth, and Dylan Balch-Lindsay, "Draining the Sea: Mass Killing and Guerrilla Warfare," *International Organization* 58, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 375–408.

³⁷ Harry Eckstein, "Case Study and Theory in Political Science," in *Handbook of Political Science*, ed. Nelson Polsby and Fred Greenstein (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1975).

³⁸ See Charles Ragin, *The Comparative Method: Moving beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); and Theodore W. Meckstroth, "Most Different Systems' and 'Most Similar Systems': A Study in the Logic of Comparative Inquiry," *Comparative Political Studies* 8, no. 2 (April 1975): 132–57.

³⁹ The terms of the 1991 London agreement required Eritrea to wait two years to hold a referendum, but this essentially deferred recognition, rather than blocking it.

secession and then for independence. In both cases, the organizers of the movements faced hostile host states (leading to violence in the Eritrean case), ethnically divided territories, and international opportunities as well as constraints.⁴⁰ Macedonia and Eritrea also represent interesting case studies in themselves, since identity took center stage in both struggles for independence. In each case, the identities themselves were contested internally, and the choices that came out of these disputes often entailed significant costs: Eritrean separatists at one point eschewed a transnational identity that cost them vital external assistance; Macedonian separatists insisted on the name “Macedonia,” leading to a crippling trade embargo. These choices, therefore, present interesting empirical puzzles. We argue that deconstructing the stakes of these seemingly trivial disputes will contribute importantly to the literatures on both secessionism and identity politics. Finally, by examining these cases over time and across space, we hold many internal factors constant in determining whether specific changes in their respective domestic and international environments led the leaders of these movements to select new identities in the manner predicted by the model.

Eritrea

After the Second World War, the United Nations (UN) was given the task of determining the political future of Eritrea, a former Italian colony. Though small, the Eritrean region was remarkably ethnically diverse. The population comprised nine ethnolinguistic groups and was evenly split between Christians, who mainly lived in the highlands, and Muslims, who inhabited the lowlands. Sixty years of shared administration gave rise to a nascent sense of Eritrean identity and sharpened the cleavages between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which laid claim to the area. In the late 1940s, American and British officials estimated that 75 percent of Eritreans favored independence over uniting with Ethiopia or dividing the region between Ethiopia and Sudan.⁴¹

Ethiopia succeeded in achieving federation with Eritrea in 1950 and annexed the territory in 1962. The union was problematic from the start. The Ethiopian state was Christian and its language Amharic (spoken by none of Eritrea’s ethnolinguistic groups). Virtually the entire Eritrean Muslim population opposed the federation. In addition to their considerable religious and linguistic differences, the two regions had incompatible economic and social structures: Ethiopia’s feudal economy threatened the status of the recently

⁴⁰ In each case, the groups are facing cross-pressures. If all dynamics pointed in the same direction, then it would be difficult to determine which factors mattered most. Thus, the two cases serve as crucial or critical cases. Eckstein, “Case Study and Theory in Political Science.”

⁴¹ Richard Leonard, “Popular Participation in Liberation and Revolution,” in *The Long Struggle of Eritrea for Independence and Constructive Peace*, ed. Lionel Cliffe and Basil Davidson (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1988), 96; and John Sorenson, “Discourses on Eritrean Nationalism and Identity,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 29, no. 2 (June 1991): 306.

emancipated Muslim serf class. A small segment of the Christian population (mainly the intelligentsia and the working class) mobilized early against the Ethiopian regime. Its opposition was based mainly on language grievances as well as Ethiopia's dismantling of the federation and its suppression of the Eritrean trade union movement. Armed struggle broke out in 1961.

The Muslim-dominated Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF)—the first significant armed secessionist organization in Eritrea—displayed a strong communal identification from the start, which intensified as the ELF sought external support. In exile in Cairo, ELF leaders actively courted Arab states by portraying the ELF as an Arab-Muslim revolutionary movement fighting to free Eritrea's Muslims from persecution and domination by the local Christian population. This layering of communal over territorial identity secured for the ELF much-needed outside assistance from radical Arab nationalist states such as Syria, Libya, South Yemen, and Iraq—assistance that strengthened both internal and external perceptions of the group as an Arab-Islamic organization.⁴² The weaponry and training supplied by the Arab states allowed the ELF to develop into a serious military threat to Ethiopia's control over the Eritrean lowlands. Reliant on their Arab patrons, the ELF leaders went so far as to portray their struggle as “the strike of the red Arab revolution in the black continent,” despite the minuscule percentage of Arabs in Eritrea.⁴³

By the late 1960s, the ELF's growing size forced a reorganization of its fighters; the leadership created four zones based on territorial and ethnic lines. The zonal system exacerbated these pre-existing divisions, as each zone became a fiefdom. Zonal commanders competed fiercely with one another for territory and resources, and interzonal cooperation was so limited that very little activity was directed against the Ethiopians.⁴⁴ In 1966, a separate zone was created to incorporate the increasing numbers of Eritrean Christians who opposed Ethiopian rule. But as more Christians supported the nationalist struggle, the ELF's Arab-Islamic identification became very problematic; it not only characterized the Christians as enemies and infidels, but also excluded Christians from the “Eritrean nation” that the ELF was fighting to liberate. Christians who joined the ELF did not feel welcome in the organization, where they were regarded with suspicion and sometimes outright hostility; they were also prevented from rising to positions of importance.

In 1967, Ethiopia launched a devastating offensive against the severely factionalized ELF. Meeting little opposition, the Ethiopian army rampaged through Muslim areas as well as the Christian highlands—burning villages, slaughtering animals, and massacring civilians. As a consequence, nearly the

⁴² This helped ensure Israel's continued support of Haile Selassie's regime.

⁴³ *Africa Confidential*, 13 March 1970.

⁴⁴ See Sishagne Shumet, “The Genesis of the Differences in the Eritrean Secessionist Movement (1960–1970),” *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* 2 (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, 1989), for details.

entire Eritrean population turned against Ethiopia. The ELF's disastrous attempts to repel these attacks inspired a reform movement within the ELF made up of fighters who had been trained in Syria and China, as well as new student recruits. Both the returning fighters and the students identified themselves as Marxists. Because most of these students were Christians and because students played a leading role in the new organization, the reform movement contained a disproportionately large Christian element.⁴⁵ Leaders of the dissident faction viewed the ELF's political and military structures as outdated and ineffectual; they were outspoken in their frustration with the "corrosive Muslim-Christian schism within the organization."⁴⁶ Specifically, they criticized the leadership for its narrow Arab-Islamic identification, its ill treatment of Christian members, and its abuses against Christian civilians. In 1969, the ELF leadership moved to suppress the dissidents violently. Hundreds of Christian members of the ELF perished in sectarian violence, fled to Sudan, or surrendered to the Ethiopian army.⁴⁷

Shortly thereafter, several groups broke away from the ELF and eventually coalesced in the early 1970s to become the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Although labeled a Christian group, the EPLF was the product of the merging of two dissident factions—Christian and Muslim—and it had both Muslims and Christians in its leading bodies.⁴⁸ By 1972, civil war had erupted within the Eritrean liberation movement, as the ELF and the EPLF competed for dominance. Nonetheless, Eritreans flocked to join the struggle; by 1977, each group had roughly 20,000 fighters.⁴⁹ After a decade of sporadic intra-Eritrean fighting, the EPLF completely eclipsed the ELF, which was driven out of Eritrea in 1981.

The EPLF ultimately prevailed over the ELF for several interrelated reasons. First, the EPLF rejected the ELF's communal identification and self-consciously propagated a nonsectarian, territorial Eritrean identity that could accommodate everyone who supported independence. Throughout *Our Struggle and Its Goals*, a 1973 manifesto that laid out its reasons for separating from the ELF, the EPLF leadership criticized the divisive ethnic and sectarian antagonisms that the ELF promoted:

⁴⁵ John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 123.

⁴⁶ Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 112.

⁴⁷ David Pool, "Eritrean Nationalism," in *Nationalism and Self-Determination in the Horn of Africa*, ed. I. M. Lewis (London: Ithaca Press, 1983), 187, puts the number at 44–450 between 1966 and 1969; Shumet, "Genesis of the Differences," 456, estimates that 200 were killed in 1969–70 and more than 200 others surrendered to Ethiopia.

⁴⁸ Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, 143.

⁴⁹ Lloyd Ellingson, "The Origins and Development of the Eritrean Liberation Movement," *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, ed. R. Hess (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 623.

It is a great shame that there should exist religious, ethnic and other divisions within the Eritrean liberation struggle. As freedom fighters, our role should be to eradicate this and other ills of Eritrean society. . . . [I]t is wrong to divide the Eritrean people on the basis of religion. . . . How many Christians or Muslims exist in Eritrea is of no importance or concern to us. . . . In Eritrea, when Eritrean Muslims are oppressed, it is the oppression of the Eritrean people; and when Eritrean Christians are oppressed, it is also the oppression of the Eritrean people. We do not recognize that oppression discriminates on the basis of religion.⁵⁰

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Since it was primarily the Christian community that was mobilizing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the EPLF attracted the bulk of the new recruits to the nationalist struggle. Its egalitarian, nonsectarian creed appealed to disenchanted elements within the ELF, and veteran fighters defected in large numbers to the EPLF, providing further support.⁵¹ The EPLF also abandoned the divisive zonal system, adopting a single command structure that reflected its emphasis on building national unity. In matters large and small, the EPLF leadership strove to demonstrate its commitment to an inclusive, multicultural definition of Eritrean identity.

Second, the EPLF had layered an ideological identity onto its territorial identity. Its leadership was committed to social revolution as part of the liberation struggle, and it adopted a “selective, pragmatic (even eclectic)” Marxist philosophy.⁵² In contrast, the ELF believed social reforms were secondary to military victory, and it therefore made little effort to address issues such as land reform. The EPLF’s economic and social programs proved extremely popular; it provided much-needed services such as schools and medical care, undertook land reform, set up village assemblies and peasant associations, and worked to improve the status of women. Its ability to effect positive change in the lives of the populations under its control brought it loyalty and support.

The ascendancy of the EPLF had important implications for outside support of the secessionist struggle. In the early years of ELF-EPLF infighting, both groups received aid from Arab states. The ELF, which proclaimed an Arab-Islamic identity, enjoyed the bulk of this support. In order to unify domestic support for the liberation struggle, the EPLF was determined to reject this communal identity. Its leadership proclaimed “we wish to make it clear to those who give aid and support in the name of Christianity or Islam that such aid or support is of no use to us; we do not want it.”⁵³ Consequently, it lost the support of its Arab states. The Marxist EPLF could not compensate for this loss

⁵⁰ EPLF, “Our Struggle and Its Goals,” *Liberation* 2, no. 3 (1973): 5–23. To be clear, Issaias Afewerki, the leader of the EPLF and the current president of Eritrea, wrote the manifesto himself in 1971.

⁵¹ Roy Pateman, *Even the Stones Are Burning* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1990), 138.

⁵² Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 123–24.

⁵³ EPLF, “Our Struggle and Its Goals.”

by using its ideological identity to obtain outside support, because by the late 1970s the Ethiopian state, too, had embraced Marxism. As mentioned earlier, the identity of the secessionist movement must be distinct from that of the host state for its identity to resonate and draw outside support. The Soviet bloc thus rationally chose to channel assistance to the Ethiopian state, as the stronger of the two parties. According to cold war logic, this might have allowed the EPLF to attract Western support, but the EPLF's Marxist platform was central to its local appeal. Consequently, layering on a capitalist or pro-Western identity to gain U.S. support was not feasible.

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Deprived of external patronage, the EPLF struggled throughout the 1980s to defeat the much larger, Soviet-equipped Ethiopian army. Its lack of outside assistance "gave rise to the [EPLF's] emphasis on self-reliance and inward-oriented development."⁵⁴ Self-reliance became an integral feature of its domestic strategy, which reinforced the EPLF's commitments to its territorial and ideological identities. The movement could hope to defeat the Ethiopians only if it attracted the support of all or most Eritreans. The EPLF accomplished this by promoting an Eritrean territorial identity. This further bound the population to the movement through its reform program, which substantially improved the population's living standards. Its principle of self-reliance contributed to the consolidation of a territorially based national consciousness by reminding Eritreans that what unified them was the common experience of sacrifice and struggle for liberation from Ethiopian rule. The EPLF finally defeated the Ethiopian army in 1991, attaining independence for Eritrea after three decades of armed conflict.

The story of Eritrean secessionism is one of constant recalibration of its identity structure to maximize its chances for independence. To mobilize international support for its cause in the early days, secessionist leaders layered an Islamic identity onto its territorial identity, thereby obtaining support from the Arab world. This identity grew to be problematic in the 1970s, however, as it excluded a growing pool of potential supporters from among the Christian population. A successful reform movement (the EPLF) therefore arose that eschewed all religious identities, despite the attendant loss of international support. The EPLF also could not use its ideological identity to attract outside support, for there was no longer an ideological distinction between Eritrea and Ethiopia; moreover, the EPLF required its Marxist orientation in order to maintain local support. Eventually, EPLF leaders secured widespread domestic support for their movement using a purely territorial identity based on shared Eritrean grievances against the center. The cost of foregone external support was more than outweighed by the benefit of increased unity within the movement, which turned out to be vital to its success. Although the EPLF's ultimate victory was assisted greatly by its alliance with the non-Eritrean Tigrayans who had captured the central government, the EPLF would

⁵⁴ Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 128.

not have been in position to ally with other groups without its strategic use of identities throughout the course of the conflict.

Macedonia

Macedonia provides an interesting contrast to Eritrea, as Macedonia engaged in a protracted struggle for international recognition after a bloodless secession, whereas Eritrea had fought a long and bloody war for secession, after which recognition came fairly quickly. As Macedonia moved toward peaceful secession,⁵⁵ the fledgling state faced daunting challenges: a nationalist Macedonian majority, a disgruntled and fearful Albanian minority, regional civil wars leading to economic sanctions, and opposition from neighboring Greece. Given the relatively recent development of Macedonian nationalism, it should have been comparatively easy to placate both the Albanian minority and the Greek government by establishing the state on a default territorial Macedonian identity. Instead, Macedonian leaders overlaid this identity with a communal identity based on the myth of an “ancient Macedonia,” with serious repercussions for Macedonia’s viability as a state.

The contemporary Macedonian identity can be dated back only to the 1940s, despite Macedonian claims of direct descent from Alexander the Great.⁵⁶ Communist Yugoslavian leader Josip Broz (known by his nom de guerre, Tito) created the Macedonian language and the autocephalous Macedonian Orthodox Church as a means of distinguishing Macedonia, a constituent republic within the Yugoslav federation, from Bulgaria.⁵⁷ As Yugoslavia neared collapse in 1990–91, Macedonia’s communist leader, Kiro Gligorov (together with his Bosnian counterpart, Alija Izetbegović) proposed a variety of solutions to save the federation, fearing the worst for his republic. Gligorov apparently believed that the dissolution of Yugoslavia would be fatal to Macedonian national consciousness, which was still relatively new. With Slovenia having gained de facto sovereignty, however, and with Croatia’s secessionist struggle escalating to war, nationalist elements within Macedonia began to clamor for independence. As Croatia neared independence, the Macedonian leadership concluded that it would not be tenable for the

⁵⁵ For an account of Macedonia’s relatively peaceful statehood, focusing less on identity and more on corruption, see Robert Hislope, “How Is Ethnic Peace Possible? Explaining Macedonia’s Peaceful Decade,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, 2004.

⁵⁶ The idea of Macedonia and of Macedonians existed before 1945, but Tito’s efforts gave the idea of Macedonia a foundation for political, social, and economic organization. Interestingly, early Macedonian nationalists had sought not independence, but rather union with Bulgaria. Indeed, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization—a major political movement of the late 1800s—was actually an irredentist group.

⁵⁷ Hugh Poulton, *Who Are the Macedonians?* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 117–18. Also see Duncan Perry, “The Republic of Macedonia: Finding Its Way,” in *Politics, Power, and the Struggle for Democracy in South-East Europe*, ed. Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 270.

republic to remain within a truncated Yugoslav state, in which Macedonians would be drafted to fight Serbia's wars. They therefore held a referendum, which gained overwhelming approval (although the Albanian minority largely boycotted it). Gligorov presided over the country both before and after its de facto independence in 1992.

Despite the peaceful withdrawal of Yugoslav forces from Macedonia, the Serbian "threat from the north" was taken very seriously, for several reasons: first, nearly all of the republic's communications and transportation routes passed through Serbia; second, the Serbian Orthodox Church was stepping up its claims on church property in Macedonia; and third, major public figures in Serbia began crossing the republic off the map of Yugoslavia and referring to it as *Vardarska banovina*, or "South Serbia."⁵⁸ The leader of the main Serbian opposition party, Vuk Drašković, had actually called for partition of the republic between Serbia and Bulgaria.⁵⁹ There was a widely held belief in the Balkans that Macedonia could not survive as an independent country. Bulgaria, Albania, and Serbia each therefore attempted to strengthen their ties with the region with the common expectation that "Macedonia would either be annexed by one neighbour or be divided between or among them, solving the 'Macedonische Frage' once and for all."⁶⁰

It was in this context of feared extinction that Gligorov established Macedonia's signature foreign policy. His multipronged approach was, among other things, to establish an "active equi-distance" to all of its neighboring countries as a means of achieving "a new balance in the Balkans."⁶¹ The new state's identity was central to this balancing act. It was strongly felt among Macedonia's leaders and citizens alike that retaining "Yugoslav" in its name—as in "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (FYROM), which is how it was referred to by much of the outside world until it gained recognition as "Macedonia"—was unacceptable: "the compromise name left open the possibility of Macedonia rejoining, or being forced to rejoin, the rump Yugoslavia dominated by Serbia."⁶² Albania, too, favored Macedonia's continued association with Yugoslavia, as this was seen as a convenient way station for achieving an *Anschluss* between Albania and Albanians from Macedonia and other parts of Yugoslavia.

A second critical problem for the fledgling state was how to bridge the gap between the country's Slavophone Macedonians and its ethnic Albanians. The Albanians speak an entirely different language and practice a

⁵⁸ Dimitar Mirčev, "Engineering the Foreign Policy of a New Independent State: The Case of Macedonia, 1990–6," in *The New Macedonian Question*, ed. James Pettifer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 204–5.

⁵⁹ Perry, "Republic of Macedonia," 175.

⁶⁰ Mirčev, "Engineering," 209.

⁶¹ Interview with Kiro Gligorov in the daily Belgrade newspaper, *Borba*, 26 October 1992, as cited in Mirčev, "Engineering," 210.

⁶² Mirčev, "Engineering," 178.

different religion. According to census figures, Albanians made up 23 percent of the state population. This minority also resided in the border region, close to both their kin state and the ethnically Albanian Serbian province of Kosovo. Although Macedonian elites did not need Albanian support to govern, alienating the community was seen as very risky, as an Albanian separatist movement could challenge their state's very existence.⁶³ The need for Albanian acquiescence—either formal or informal—was therefore a key domestic constraint in Macedonia's identity construction. 63

To build a unified state, Gligorov was forced to make concessions both to Macedonian nationalists and to the ethnic Albanian minority. The country's 1991 constitution declared the Slavophone Macedonians to be the constituent "people" of the state and declared that all citizens were to be treated equally before the law.⁶⁴ Despite this equality clause, the wording of the constitution infuriated the Albanians. Gligorov and other Macedonian leaders therefore tried to assuage Albanian fears by including members of the Party of Democratic Prosperity (PDP), the largest Albanian party, in successive government cabinets. 64

As Macedonian leaders attempted to appease the country's Albanian minority, they faced countervailing pressure from Macedonian nationalists, who were gaining sway with the Slavophone majority. The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization—Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity (IMRO-DPMNU—obtained a plurality of the votes in the first competitive elections. Harkening back to the glory of the earlier IMRO movement, the IMRO-DPMNU was strongly anti-Albanian and favored layering a communal Macedonian identity onto the state. This identity would appeal to all ethnic Macedonians, including those residing across the border in Greece. One scholar wrote, "[Macedonia's] unabashedly irredentist approach in its early days did much to aggravate relations with Greece."⁶⁵ Because the extremist IMRO-DPMNU achieved a significant electoral success in 1991, however, the Macedonian leadership could not ignore its wishes, which were widely shared among the majority Slavophones. 65

The Macedonian leadership therefore attempted to layer a Hellenic communal identity on top of their territorial identity in order to infuse the nascent nation-state with both meaning and legitimacy. Hellenic symbols were ideal

⁶³ Indeed, conflict broke out between Albanians and Macedonians after the war in Kosovo, although it was not entirely clear that secession was the goal. It took an effort by NATO and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to broker and implement an accord that still seems to be holding up, albeit somewhat tenuously.

⁶⁴ Thomas Buck, "Fear and Loathing in Macedonia: Ethnic Nationalism and the Albanian Problem," paper prepared for presentation at the Conference on State and Nation Building in East Central Europe, Institute on East Central Europe, Columbia University, New York, 1996, p. 8. Several other countries in the region, including Croatia and Romania, created similar clauses, much to the consternation of their minorities.

⁶⁵ Perry, "Republic of Macedonia," 242. Because of the existence of Macedonians in Greece (or Slavophone Greeks, as the government considered them), Greece feared Macedonian irredentism.

for this purpose, since they appealed to Macedonian nationalists and yet did directly imply policies that might alienate the Albanian minority. Hugh Poulton wrote that the Albanians “do not see [the name] as a major problem. They view the name ‘Republic of Macedonia’ as being territorial without any special ethnic Slav connotations, and they do not object to the references to antiquity.”⁶⁶ Hellenic symbols such as Alexander the Great and Philip of Macedon were, however, central to the Greek identity.

To the outrage of both ordinary Greeks and the Greek government, the IMRO-DPMNU party platform called for the unification of the “three Macedonian regions,” deliberately choosing as its party symbols the ancient Macedonian “Vergina sun” and the medieval Bulgarian lion, in reference to the Macedonian minorities in Greece and Bulgaria. This not only raised the possibility that “Slavophone Greeks” might be joined to Macedonia but also challenged “the fundamental notion that Greece is a homogeneous state.”⁶⁷ To make matters worse, public demonstrations in Skopje called for the “unification of Macedonia,” including the Macedonian provinces in Greece. Despite the fact that “there is no conceivable way that Greece can [be] said to be threatened by the existence of a small, independent Macedonian state,”⁶⁸ the Greek government asserted that these gestures were an expression of “future expansionist aims on the neighboring Greek province of Macedonia,” claiming that these goals were inscribed in the country’s constitution.⁶⁹ For these reasons, Greece objected strongly to the recognition of the new state under the name “Macedonia.”

Fearing that territorial claims on Greece were implicit in the name itself, the Greek government demanded that Macedonia instead be given the name of “Skopje” or some other name that did not include “Macedonia.” As the conflict escalated, the European Union postponed its recognition of Macedonia, due to Greece’s insistence that the country not be recognized with the name of Macedonia or “any of its derivatives.” Despite these pressures, Macedonian leaders refused to back down on the issue of the name. In response, Greece imposed an economic blockade on Macedonia for more than three years, which—together with UN sanctions against neighboring Serbia—had a crippling effect on the nascent country’s economy.⁷⁰ If identity were unimportant to Macedonia’s secessionist bid, the country’s leadership should have

⁶⁶ Interview with former PDP chairman Sami Ibrahim, Skopje, Macedonia, 15 April 1993, cited in Poulton, *Who Are the Macedonians?* 184.

⁶⁷ Perry, “Republic of Macedonia,” 269.

⁶⁸ Bodgan Denitch, *Ethnic Nationalism: The Tragic Death of Yugoslavia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 103.

⁶⁹ David E. Sutton, *Memories Cast in Stone: The Relevance of the Past in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 177.

⁷⁰ The direct costs to Macedonia of the economic sanctions against the former Yugoslavia by the Security Council in 1992 were \$1.2 billion; the damage in 1993 (after the coming into force of Resolution 820 in April) was estimated at \$1.8 billion. See Ljubomir Jakimovski and Velko Andreev, *The Republic of Macedonia* (Skopje: Goce Delčev, 1993), 108.

relented at this point, accepting a name less objectionable to Greece. That it refused to do so goes against arguments focusing on the primacy of the international arena and lends support to the thesis that identity plays an important role in the secessionist process itself.

In 1993, Macedonia obtained UN recognition under the provisional name FYROM, with the understanding that the Greek and Macedonian governments would continue to negotiate over the country's final name. In subsequent negotiations, Greece refused the names "Upper Macedonia" and "Nova Macedonia." "Slavomacedonia" was seen as more acceptable, but this was strongly rejected by Macedonia's Albanian minority. The Greek government almost gave way on the name issue, which led to the downfall of some high-ranking public officials in Greece: Constantine Mitsotakis lost power and was replaced by Andreas Papandreou in large part due to the former's perceived weakness on the Macedonia issue.⁷¹ In late 1995, the two sides finally signed an "Interim Agreement" in which Greece promised to lift its embargo and recognize Macedonia (as FYROM) in return for Macedonia's promise to remove an emblem from its flag and eliminate the "irredentist" passages from its constitution. Macedonia's leaders thus agreed to strip away part of their country's Hellenic communal identity in response to international pressures, returning to the territorial identity with which they had begun. In so doing, they secured Macedonia's induction into the state system.

Why did Macedonia hold onto its name despite the considerable costs of doing so? Domestic politics provide part of the answer to this puzzle: Gligorov and his allies needed to gain the support of Macedonian nationalists in order to stay in office. They also needed to avoid antagonizing the sizable Albanian minority. Because of this, they could not have overlaid the Macedonian identity with a religious identity, for this would have driven a further wedge between Orthodox Macedonians and Muslim Albanians. Moreover, an Orthodox identity would not have drawn a clear distinction between the secessionist entity, on the one hand, and Serbia and Bulgaria on the other.⁷² The use of a religious identity might also have alienated the Christian countries of western Europe, thus hurting Macedonia's chances of joining European "clubs." A communal Slavic identity was likewise infeasible, for this too would have excluded the ethnic Albanian minority.

Borrowing the symbols of Alexander the Great provided a solution to this bind, since this identity answered the domestic challenge from Macedonian nationalists while failing to antagonize the Albanian minority. This identity choice did greatly antagonize Greece, however. In response, Greece

⁷¹ James Pettifer, "The New Macedonian Question," *International Affairs* 68, no. 3 (July 1992): 482; Vasil Tupurkovski, "The Balkan Crisis and the Republic of Macedonia," in *Crises in the Balkans: Views from the Participants*, ed. Constantine P. Danopoulos and Kostas G. Messas (Boulder: Westview, 1997), 146; and Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1995), 358.

⁷² Poulton, *Who Are the Macedonians?* 118.

blocked Macedonia's recognition as a sovereign state. In the end, Gligorov was forced to jettison part of Macedonia's identity structure—playing down its communal “ancient Macedonia” identity while noting “we should not be slaves to hypotheses that we are direct descendants of Alexander the Great.”⁷³

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In sum, Macedonian elites chose an identity structure that simultaneously neutralized Slavophone ethnic outbidders while minimizing provocation of their country's ethnic Albanian minority. In the beginning, Macedonia's default identity (the name of the former Yugoslav republic) was deemed insufficient to ensure the support of Macedonian nationalists. Due to the problems inherent in communal identities, the Gligorov government settled on a reconstructed “ancient Macedonian” identity by co-opting Hellenic icons such as Alexander the Great. Due to the success of this identity in domestic politics, Macedonia's leaders held on to this identity structure for years, even though it provoked an economic embargo and blocked recognition of Macedonia's sovereignty. The costs of an alternative identity structure on the domestic level would have far outweighed the costs of Greek retaliation at the international level.

Clearly, Macedonia's identity is still contested, as a significant portion of the Albanian population is not entirely happy with the current formulation. The largely stripped-down territorial identity, derived from its name as a republic in Yugoslavia, was the best Macedonian politicians could do—both because of ethnic Macedonian desires and because there were simply no other alternatives.

This case, along with the Eritrean one, suggests both that domestic politics tend to weigh more heavily in secessionist identity selection than international concerns, and further, that territorial identities very often serve as the only viable identity structure for both secessionist movements and nascent states.

THE DILEMMAS OF DIVORCE

This analysis demonstrates that the construction of secessionist identities is neither random nor predetermined. Rather, it is guided by secessionist leaders' concerns for maximizing both domestic and international support. The organizers of secessionist movements usually have a choice of mobilizational identities; movements in ethnically heterogeneous regions, however, must usually revert to their territorial identity or face defeat. These cases show that identities are taken seriously as a tool for resource mobilization and that such choices are not predetermined: groups routinely adopt

⁷³ Kiro Gligorov, “The Unrealistic Dreams of Large States,” in Pettifer, *New Macedonian Question*, 102.

identities to improve their chance of success and discard them when they are no longer useful. The cases examined here suggest that leaders of secessionist campaigns face significant constraints in selecting their identity structure, and further, that domestic factors tend to weigh more heavily than international factors in their calculations.

Comparisons

These case studies suggest that secessionist movements face difficult choices and that their ability to define themselves is quite constrained. They also offer interesting comparisons and contrasts, given how long it took Eritrea to become independent as compared to Macedonia's relatively painless secession.

Both secessionist movements faced the problem of unifying deeply divided societies. Eritrea and Macedonia have major religious and linguistic cleavages dividing their populations. Because of this, secessionist leaders used latent territorial identities in their respective regions, relying on default identities bestowed on them by previous regimes. The EPLF ultimately prevailed over the ELF because it created an inclusive nationalism based on residence in Eritrean territory. In Macedonia, a thin territorial identity was used to forestall ethnic outbidding of Slavophone extremists who threatened to alienate the large Albanian minority.

Factors in the international environment also affect the choices made by secessionist groups, consistent with realist expectations. The ELF played up its Arab, Islamic identity in order to attract the support of Arab and other Islamic states; the EPLF, in contrast, was unable to layer an additional identity onto its identity structure to attract outside patrons of its own. Despite this, its thin identity structure allowed EPLF leaders to build a far more unified secessionist movement, allowing it to eclipse the ELF and ultimately prevail against the Ethiopian army. For their part, Macedonian leaders were pressured by the Greek government to redefine Macedonia's identity after having layered a Hellenic communal identity on top of its base territorial identity. In spite of significant international pressure to change its identity structure, there were no viable alternative identities that Macedonia could use that would placate its Albanian minority while defending against Slavophone outbidding (race, religion, and language were all self-limiting or domestically infeasible). The best Macedonia could do once it had jettisoned its "ancient Macedonia" identity was to emphasize its territorial identity as an island of stability and tolerance in a very dangerous region.

Third, outside actors care about the identities of secessionist groups and often choose sides in internal conflicts in response to group identity structures. The Muslim ELF, for example, received far more support from the Islamic world than did the EPLF. Marxist states, too, scaled back support of the Eritrean independence movement once Ethiopia adopted a Marxist

identity—effectively erasing the ideological cleavage between the separatists and the host state. Likewise, the story of Macedonia's initial postindependence years was one of Greece's obsession with Macedonia's identity and what it meant for Greece's own national identity.

74 Common constraints on identity selection include the group's history of conflict with the center and the government's domestic and foreign policies. Perhaps the most important factor influencing perceptions of Macedonia's identity was its brief history as a republic of Yugoslavia. Indeed, its name on the Central Intelligence Agency's maps (and on Microsoft Word language-setup menus) was and still is FYROM.⁷⁴ The behavior of the host government matters here as well. Ethiopia's revolution removed one of the key divides between the separatists and the host state by eliminating the Marxist-Leninist appeal of the separatists: external actors with a socialist orientation no longer had any incentive to support the Eritrean separatists. Likewise, Ethiopia's support of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and that group's norm of noninterference may have deterred other African states from supporting Eritrean independence.⁷⁵ Host state actions were less of a consideration in 75 the Macedonian case, since the Yugoslav government did not actively contest Macedonia's independence bid.

How do domestic and international constraints interact to influence group identity selection? In the Eritrean case, the international game had major repercussions on the secessionist conflict. The use of an Islamic communal identity by separatist leaders yielded external assistance but alienated potential supporters of the movement. The two arenas thus interacted to produce material trade-offs for the movement. Likewise, domestic political competition in Macedonia induced leaders to choose an identity that adversely affected the country's relationship with Greece; Greek foreign policy, meanwhile, clearly influenced the decisions made by leaders on the domestic level.

Perhaps most important, this analysis indicates that domestic constraints play a greater role in a movement's identity selection than international concerns. Otherwise, it is hard to explain why the ELPF did not actively seek external support, or why the absence of this assistance did not lead to the organization's failure. Similarly, it is difficult to account for Macedonia's refusal to placate Greece by changing its name if domestic considerations did not generally loom larger than international constraints. These cases demonstrate that, in the end, the leaders of Macedonia and Eritrea put their domestic audiences first. Creating and sustaining a unified movement appears to be

⁷⁴ The United States finally recognized Macedonia by its preferred name in November 2004. Although this may have been an inducement for Macedonians to support the Ohrid accord, it is notable that this occurred days after President George W. Bush's re-election, when the Greek-American lobby no longer mattered to his campaign.

⁷⁵ Saideman, in *Ties That Divide*, argues that the OAU and the norm of territorial integrity matter much less than argued.

vital to the success of secessionist projects. Once established, groups must maintain the unity of their base, even if doing so means forgoing external assistance and thereby prolonging the struggle.

Limitations and Implications

We generally expect territorial identities to matter most, especially when the territories in question are ethnically heterogeneous. Separatist groups without a salient territorial identity will have to rely on other identities to establish their mobilizational base. This is particularly true of irredentist groups. For them, it is less important to establish a separate territorial identity than it is to establish a communal linkage with their “homeland.” Examples include the Bosnian Serbs and Croats, the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey. This model does not seek to explain the choices of leaders of irredentist movements, the success of which is contingent on a different set of opportunities and constraints than those attempting to establish a separate nation-state.⁷⁶

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The breakdown of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union was only the beginning of a new wave of separatism in the post-cold war world. New secessionist movements have emerged in newly independent post-Soviet states, including Chechnya in Russia; Trans-Dneistria in Moldova; and Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Adjara in Georgia, among others. Meanwhile, old secessionist conflicts continue apace with the Basques in Spain, the Canadian Québécois; the Moros in the Philippines; the Acehnese in Indonesia; the Kashmiris and Tripuras in India; and others. To predict the trajectories of such conflicts, it is important to understand why secessionist organizations frame their struggles in the way they do. This article seeks to contribute to the wealth of recent work on ethnic conflicts in general and secessionist conflicts in particular by exploring the ways in which identities serve as a mobilizational resource for secessionist movements—specifically, the conditions under which secessionist leaders mobilize on one identity rather than another at any point in time.

Understanding these calculations is important because the ways in which separatists define their campaigns have a lasting impact on both the seceding region and the host state, regardless of whether the movement achieves its aims. The identities chosen in the context of these battles also influence the shape and content of future conflicts at both the substate and the regional level. The 2004 attack in Beslan, Russia, for example, increased the international salience of the Chechen conflict. Having joined forces with Muslims across the border in a common fight against Moscow, the Chechen movement

⁷⁶ For an analysis of the incentives and constraints influencing irredentism, see Stephen M. Saideman and R. William Ayres, “For Kin or for Country: Understanding the Causes and Constraints of Irredentism” (manuscript).

began to take on a religious identity, despite the fact that the movement's leaders originally mobilized on an ethnic basis. In response, Russian leaders have attempted to rally international and domestic opinion to their side by identifying their opponents not only as terrorists, but as Islamic extremists with links to al Qaeda.

The behavior of secessionists, host states, and external actors indicates not only that identity matters in attracting friends and mobilizing against foes, but also that identity is neither fixed nor infinitely malleable, contrary to the two competing schools of thought outlined earlier in this article. Examining the strategic nature and possible determinants of a movement's identity structure helps to clarify both the domestic and the international dynamics of ethnic conflicts. The next step is to apply this understanding to the latest conflicts, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, in order to assess the likely strategies of their various actors in the days ahead.