



ETHNIC IDENTITY AND ETHNIC CONFLICTS
(ETNİK KİMLİK VE ETNİK ÇATIŞMALAR)



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Özet

Bu makale, etnik kimlik olgusu ile Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde barışa yönelik ciddi bir tehdit kaynağı oluşturan etnik çatışmalar üzerine analitik bir tartışma içermektedir. Çalışmada, etnik kimliğin bireylerin sosyal çevreyle etkileşimi sonucu şekillenen doğal ve evrensel bir olgu olduğu, ancak doğrudan bir çatışma kaynağı oluşturmadığı vurgulanmaktadır. Etnik çatışmaların ancak etnik gruba yönelik bariz sınırlamalar ve etnik mobilizasyonun uluslararası aktörlerce desteklenmesi durumunda gerçekleşebileceği belirtilmekte, bu bağlamda söz konusu sınırlamalar ile sorunun uluslararası destek boyutu ayrıntılı bir biçimde tartışılmaktadır. Bu tartışmadan yola çıkarak, etnik uyuşmazlık çözümü sürecine ilişkin bazı genellemelere de ulaşılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Etnik Kimlik, Etnik Çatışmalar, İç Savaş, Etnik Ayrımcılık, Uyuşmazlık Çözümü.



Abstract

This article provides an analytical discussion on the phenomenon of ethnic identity and ethnically-driven conflicts that have threatened regional and global peace in the post-Cold War era. The study stresses that while ethnic identity is a natural and universal phenomenon, it is not directly a source of conflict. Ethnic identity can lead to inter-group conflicts if certain negative conditions exist for ethnic groups and if ethnic mobilization is supported by international actors, discussed in detail. Several lessons are also drawn from the discussions, in concluding the study, with respect to the process of ethnic conflict resolution.

Keywords: *Ethnic Identity, Ethnic Conflicts, Civil Wars, Ethnic Discrimination, Conflict Resolution.*

INTRODUCTION

In the post-Cold War era, ethnically-driven intra-state conflicts have replaced the ideological clashes of the Cold War as the principle sources of current conflicts. To be sure, from May 1988, when the Cold War was coming to its end, to the present day, there have been 47 conflicts the United Nations (UN) intervened and only 3 of them were inter-state in character (the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Chad-Libya border dispute in 1994, and Ethiopia-Eritrea border dispute in 1998-2000). If we add the latest Iraqi invasion by the United States to the number 3, the total number of inter-state conflicts during the whole post-Cold War period is only 4, whereas 47



overt intra-state conflicts have occurred in the same period, most of which are rooted in ethnic clashes.¹

Ethnic conflicts involve inter-group rivalries between two or more ethno-cultural groups that feel different from each other. The ethnic criteria used by conflicting groups to define themselves may include common descent, shared historic experiences, or valued cultural traits. In some cases, race and blood ties may also be very important, but in general, there is no warrant for assuming that any one basis for ethnic identity is *inherently* more important than any other. In the final analysis, self-attachment to a group is a matter of personal feeling, which may be subjectively defined based on different criteria (Rutter and Tienda, 2005).

As we learn from psychoanalytic child researchers, no one is born with a distinct ethnic identity. Ethnic identity, or self-attachment to a group, is slowly formed during childhood period. The child prepares itself for this process by beginning to accumulate the “shared reservoirs” of its group supported and sponsored by the adults in that group. Group traumas and glories, the image of relevant out-groups are systematically indoctrinated by the society in the minds of children. This transmission is not simply like the child’s hearing stories, reading books, etc. It occurs mostly in a silent fashion through the media of parental stories, communal festivals, formal education (socialization); and through the child’s relationship with important figures in the society (identification) (Comstock, 2005).

¹ Source: UN statistics, obtained from the official UN web site, www.un.org (30.09.2009).



Once formed, ethnic identity is rather difficult to change, since individual sense of self and ethnic identity are inevitably interrelated. That is, any radical change in a formed ethnic identity would be psychologically unbearable for individuals. In fact, the self-esteem of individuals often rises and falls with the fate of their group. A success of an ethnic group uplifts the individuals in that group and a failure hurts them. Scholars usually agree that even under the most favorable external conditions, such as the lack of discrimination, possibilities for economic prosperity, and lack of nationalistic education, change in ethnic identity takes a long time and is hardly possible within one generation. The fact that people cling to their identity all the more when political and military pressure are intensified is perhaps understandable in this context.

However, ethnic identity itself is not a source of inter-group conflict. Under normal circumstances, ethnicity is expressed in peaceful rituals of competition, such as sporting events, or by a greater affection for the diet, costumes, symbols, and cultural artifacts of one's own group over those of another. Under certain conditions, however, the expression of ethnicity can take the form of maladaptive belligerence and violence. This article aims to identify and discuss such conditions making ethnic identity a vehicle of political mobilization inter-group conflict. Several lessons are also drawn from the discussions with respect to ethnic conflict resolution and peace making in war-torn societies.



CONDITIONS LEADING TO ETHNIC CONFLICTS

It can be said, in general, that ethnically-driven conflicts are usually complex phenomena and their causes are multiple. Yet commonly, there are three types of conditions -structural, psychological, and international- that often give rise to these conflicts.

I. STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS

Limitations to Identity Expression and Discrimination

First of all, when we look through ethnic conflicts anywhere, it seems that these conflicts are not independent of the desire to express group identity. Ethnic conflicts tend particularly to occur when ethnic groups feel serious restrictions on the expression of their ethno-cultural distinction. Such restrictions may involve limitations to the use of local language (i.e., in schools and courts), exclusion of ethnic groups from political power, or limitations to the expression of local customs. In general, the greater the scope of restrictions the more likely the possibilities of ethnic challenge against the status quo. Thus, it would be seriously misleading to interpret ethnic conflicts as just a “terrorist action”, though it would be tied with terrorism, or a “foreign-party game”. These conflicts draw their strengths from ethnic and cultural bonds, not associational ones (Gurr, 1996: 53).

Another problem is discrimination. The most apparent aspect of discrimination involves unequal treatment of minority groups by dominant groups and not creating conditions for their



progress. In most Third World countries, inequalities among ethnic groups in status and access to political power have also been deliberately maintained through local law and public policy. State building almost everywhere in the Third World resulted in policies aimed at assimilating minority peoples, restraining their historic autonomy, and extracting their resources and labor force for the use of the state, dominated by a certain ethnic group or groups. Some minority peoples, including most of the overseas Chinese of Southeast Asia, for instance, have been able to share power and prosperity at the center of new states. Some others, particularly in Africa where the reach of state power is limited, have been able to hold on to *de facto* local autonomy. Yet the general effect of state building or expansion of state power in most parts of the world has been to substantially increase the grievances of most ethnically distinct groups, those who have either not being strong enough to protect their local autonomy or not been allowed to participate in power at the center (Gurr, 2000).

Discrimination is not limited with unequal treatment; it also involves cultural discrimination. That is, cultural norms and social practices in a country would be such that while dominant group norms are valued, minority norms are disvalued and marginalized. Some example of cultural discrimination may include making fun of minority languages and customs, portraying minorities as the “problem people” in movies and television programs, as well as excluding them from popular social gatherings (Yılmaz, 2007b: 12-13).

Through discrimination policies and practices, dominant groups aim to assimilate minority groups. Yet indeed, in-group solidarity usually increases within ethnic groups facing serious



discrimination. A prolonged experience of unequal treatment and discrimination, in turn, exacerbates revisionist movements for underprivileged groups to alter the status quo for the better. Ethnic groups whose underprivileged status is maintained through repression may be hesitant to act on dominant groups, but they nurture deep grievances against them. These grievances, however, may eventually be translated into conflict when conditions become “ripe” for ethnic mobilization (Yılmaz, 2005: 14).

Political System

Just having talked about the issues of the urge to express ethnic identity and discrimination, the feature of political system should also be discussed, in this respect, as these issues are closely linked with it. It is usually the case that liberal democracies² provide many structural mechanisms preventing, at least, legal discrimination and easing identity expression. For example, in most liberal democracies, minority rights are strictly protected by law, different ethnic groups have a space to exercise their own group identities, and social problems can find democratic channels to express themselves. Equally or more important, the distribution of political power can be shaped, or re-shaped, through political elections. Thus, issues concerning diverse ethnic groups can be peacefully dealt with before they escalate to large-scale conflicts.

² Democracy is one of the most freely, and wantonly, used terms in the political lexicon. Yet in a generic sense, democracy should consist of at least three basic elements: principal government officials are chosen in elections that are free, open, and relatively fair, and in which all competent adults are eligible to take part; freedom of expression; and rule of law (Muravchik, 1996: 584-585; Tilly, 2007).



That aside, a burgeoning literature has discussed the pacific culture of liberal democracies, usually called as “democratic culture”. In its origin, democratic culture is driven from the interactions of individuals with the political system, but in time, it becomes a reality on its own, dominating inter-individual relations. Democratic culture promotes peace through common constructive practices, such as openness to dialogue, tolerance to differences, peaceful resolution of social conflicts, and rejecting violence as a means to handle problems. Such qualities not only foster social harmony but also give rise to the belief that conflict may produce win-win solutions and better relations.

On the other hand, in authoritarian, totalitarian, and other non-democratically constituted states, the absence or weakness of systemic mechanisms that can alleviate social tensions may easily escalate ethnic issues to overt conflicts. In such regimes, dominant group privileges are usually supported by the local law and popular culture too, perpetuating, thus, discrimination and repression at the political level, as well as at the societal level. Hence, it is perhaps no coincidence that serious ethnic conflicts tend more frequently to occur in anti-democratic states.³

³ On the relationship between liberal democracy and social peace, Michael W. Doyle, “Liberalism and World Politics”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 4, 1986; Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993; Johusa Muravchik, “Promoting Peace Through Democracy”, *Managing Global Chaos: Sources of and Responses to International Conflict*, (Ed.) Chester A. Crocker et al., Washington DC: US Institute of Peace, 1996; Morton H. Halperin, *The Democracy Advantage: How Democracies Promote Prosperity and Peace*. New York: Routledge, 2005; James Tully. *Democracy and Civic Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.



Economic Distress and Unjust Distribution of National Wealth

Another structural factor that appears to contribute to the occurrence of ethnic conflicts in multi-ethnic societies is economic distress and unjust distribution of national sources. When the ethnically-driven intra-state conflicts that the UN has intervened are examined, it becomes clear that the GDP per capita in these countries is approximately \$2000 according to the data by *The World Factbook*. Even in some countries, such as Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, and Haiti, it is well under this figure. Research shows that there is a strong correlation between human needs deprivation and conflict. If people are not satisfied in terms of their basic needs, they may easily become conflict-prone against other individuals and the system under which they live. (Burton, 1979, 1990, 1997).

Aside from widespread poverty, in countries suffering from serious ethnic conflicts, there usually exist great gaps in the distribution of welfare among different ethnic groups. While dominant groups often get the “lion’s share” and enjoy prosperity, most minorities suffer poverty and they are entrapped in structural violence. They generally work in lower-status jobs and have lower level of income. This relative deprivation of economic well-being in comparison with dominant groups may motivate disadvantaged ethnic groups for political mobilization.

Hence, although ethnic identity is valued in and of itself, the economic dimension is still important, for a multi-ethnic state that is characterized by widespread poverty and evidently unjust distribution of national wealth is a state where ethnic antagonisms are likely to grow. Economic



well-being and perception of just distribution, on the other hand, may contribute to a sense of security, and give ethnic minorities a stake in the system. Donald L. Horowitz calls this the “distributive approach to ethnic conflict resolution”, as opposed to structural approaches based on creating a political framework. He points out that such an approach can include preferential policies aimed at raising certain groups to a position of equality through investment, employment practices, access to education, and land distribution (Horowitz, 2000: 653-681).

As a matter of fact, albeit ethnically heterogenic, the fact that there are no serious ethnic conflicts in the European Union (EU) countries where the annual GDP per capita is about \$25000 confirms a positive relationship, among other things, between economic well-being and inter-group harmony. This can be said to be the case for many other multi-ethnic but wealthy states, such as Canada, United States, Australia, New Zealand, and so on. Similarly, in the case of Cyprus, the majority of the Turkish Cypriots’ demand for a solution on the island after the Greek side’s acceptance to the EU in 2004 does not seem to be independent of expectations for economic gains.

II. PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITIONS



In most ethnic conflicts, there are also psychological issues that may be, in effect, tainted with irrationality. Political, economic, historical, and military events can sometimes become so psychologies and so “stubbornly fixed” in the minds of adversaries that without an understanding of the large group psychology, it may be impossible to fully understand ethnic conflicts.

In this regard, a hidden dimension that usually plays a significant role in situations of ethnic clashes is historic traumas. Historic traumas refer to events that invoke in the members of a group intense feelings of having been humiliated and victimized by members of another group. A group does not, of course, choose to be victimized, and subsequently to lose self-esteem, but it does choose to psychologize and mythologize to dwell upon the event. The group draws the emotional meaning of traumatic events, and mental defenses against it, into its very identity. Members of each new generation share a conscious, and unconscious, wish to repair what has been done to their ancestors to release themselves from the burden of humiliation (Volkan and Itzkowitz, 1994: 7).

What is more, once a terrible event in a group’s history becomes a historic trauma, the truth about it does not really matter. From that time on, reality is interpreted through inner perceptions and feelings. Especially, when a new conflict situation comes up and tension arises, the current enemy’s mental image becomes contaminated with the image of the enemy in the chosen trauma, even if the new enemy is not related to the original one.

A good example regarding the negative effects of historic traumas on current inter-ethnic conflicts would be the case of Cyprus. A closer look suggests that the contemporary conflict on



Cyprus is not an isolated issue having its own “private” life, but it is a significant part of the larger Greco-Turkish issue with a thousand-year history. Despite a relatively long-time of togetherness (since 1571), in general, neither the Greeks nor the Turks of Cyprus have ever considered themselves as members of a distinct Cypriot nation. They were, and still are, separate communities with strong emotional attachments to their respected motherland countries. Because of this “total body identification”, historical enmities between the larger Greek and Turkish nations have been transported to Cyprus. Both Cypriot communities brought past grieves and ideals of their respected nations to the island. Even the images of each side towards the other are pretty much the same as those of the motherland Greeks and Turks. Therefore, when the Republic of Cyprus was created by outside powers in 1960, there was an artificially-created state, but there was no cohesive Cypriot nation to support it (Xydis, 1973; Volkan and Itzkowitz, 1994).

Aside from larger Greco-Turkish hostilities, the Cypriot communities themselves have experienced many traumas at the hands of each other. The Turkish Cypriots, for instance, still remember the period between 1963-1974 as their major trauma, while the Greek Cypriots similarly refer to their own great trauma which started with the Turkish invasion in 1974. Past hurts affect the interactions of the two communities, as they do the formal negotiation process. This is one of the main reasons why the peace process on Cyprus, or outside it, does not go on smoothly (Volkan, 1989; Yılmaz, 2004).

Another example would be the ruthless attitudes of the Serbs toward Turkish, Albanian and other Muslim communities after the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. For the



Serbs, these communities were the descendents of the Ottoman Turks that defeated them in Kosovo in the 14. Century. Although over six hundred years passed, the Serbs did not forget their defeat and wanted to destroy the “ashes of the Ottomans” in an effort to “purify” Serbian nationalism. This policy manifested itself in the form of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, Kosovo, and other minority areas in the 1990s where the international community was too late to intervene.

However, it would be erroneous to claim that historic traumas directly cause ethnic conflicts. If that was true, ethnic groups that experienced great traumas at the hands of each other in the past would be in a constant state of struggle at present. Yet we know that this is not the case. Nevertheless, great past traumas lead, at least, to enemy images. Once formed, such images harm inter-group relations and breed escalatory spirals in conflict situations for several reasons, summarized as follows:

First, because of enemy images, ethnic groups in conflict see and acknowledge negative aspects of each other that fit or support the stereotype and ignore other aspects that do not fit. In other words, the parties see what they want to see and overlook what they wish to ignore. As a result of this black-and-white thinking, “de-individualization” takes place, a collectivist ethic emerges, and polarization becomes easier.

Similarly, the perception of enemy, even if it may be erroneous, helps to shape reality and brings on the self-fulfilling prophecy. Especially when suspicions run high, a “defensive” move by one side may look “provocative” to the other, evoking from the latter a further “defensive” reaction that serves only to confirm the suspicions of the former. Also, ethnic groups tend to be



aggressive towards others they view as hostile, which, in turn, encourages the others to retaliate, hence confirming the view of them as hostile.

In the same way, when a group behaves the way that the other group expects, the other group attributes that behavior to the opponent group's inner dispositions, reinforcing its view of what the opponent group is really like. When the opponent group behaves differently from the expectations of the other group, the other group, in that case, attributes that behavior to environmental pressures or the opponent group's weaknesses (Yılmaz, 2005: 5-6).

Enemy images are also mirrored. That is, as long as one group possesses certain negative images regarding other group, the other group retaliates in the same way and develops similar images, even if it does not have any in the beginning. Over time, both sides become equal in terms of having polarized images which are, indeed, quite analogous.

As a matter of fact, in a cultural study of Jewish-Arab attitudes, Raymond Cohen found that two-thirds of the Jews thought that they could not trust the Arabs, and similarly, two-thirds of the Arabs thought that they could not trust the Jews (quoted in Ryan, 1995: 87-88). Likewise, ICAP and PIAR, two major public relations firms from Greece and Turkey, which carried out a joint poll in order to measure the public views found that the Greeks and Turks almost equally mistrust each other, with 81 percent of the Greeks and 80 percent of the Turks suspicious of the other (Volkan and Itzkowitz, 1994: 167).

Finally, enemy images may lead dehumanization and perhaps this is the most dangerous aspect of such images. Dehumanization can be characterized by a decline in empathy for the other



side and involves the removal of human facets. Under normal circumstances, it is not easy for human beings to engage in violent acts and to kill other human beings. Before groups enter into large-scale violence and killing, they must first dehumanize those who mean to “eliminate” so that they can feel that they are doing the right thing. They must portray rival out-groups as crude, uncivilized, barbarian, greedy, criminal, terrorist, and even non-human, in order to release themselves from the burden of guilt feelings. Empirical evidence shows that especially during wartime, a psychological need for dehumanization arises, since killing or brutal tactics cannot be easily justified otherwise (Keen, 2005: 25-26).

Dehumanization, as a result, systematically destroys groups’ tendency to identify themselves with other human beings, and gives them a “reason,” as well as an emotional ground, for brutal tactics and killing. Therefore, the image of enemy does not only consist of feelings of strong dislike but also involves the possibility of violence, killing, and destruction under war or war-like circumstances.

III. INTERNATIONAL CONDITIONS

The factors that have been addressed and discussed so far are among major internal dynamics of serious ethnically-driven conflicts. But most ethnic conflicts are also tied to international support and they may not be fully understood without taking this dimension into account.



Foreign sympathizers can contribute substantially to an ethnic group's cohesion and political mobilization by providing material, political, and moral support. For example, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) has organized and supported oppositional activity by Palestinians in Jordan, Lebanon, and the territories occupied by Israel. Rebellious Iraqi Kurds, likewise, have at various times had the diplomatic support of the Iranian regime, Israel, and the United States. Similarly, on Cyprus, Greek Cypriots have been supported by Greece, while their Turkish counterparts by Turkey.

The most destructive consequences usually occur when competing powers support different sides in ethnopolitical conflicts. Such proxy conflicts are often protracted, very deadly, and not likely to end in negotiated settlements unless it is in the interest of external powers. When external support is withdrawn, possibilities for settlement may open up, as it happened in Angola in 2002. In Afghanistan, however, the cessation of Soviet and US support in the early 1990's led to a new phase of civil war, fought among rival groups for power. The country was devastated by the conflict among political movements that represented the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and other minorities who opposed efforts by the historically dominant Pashtuns to regain political control. Proxy wars were especially common during the Cold War, yet by no means limited to superpower rivalries. For example, in the 1980s war, both Iran and Iraq encouraged Kurdish minorities on their enemy's terrain to fight from within.

Ethnic mobilization is also prompted by the occurrence of ethnopolitical conflict elsewhere through the processes of *diffusion* and *contagion*.



Diffusion refers to the spillover of conflict from one region to another, either within or across international boundaries. For instance, in the last century, about a dozen ethnic groups in the Caucasus, including the Ossetians, Abkhaz, Azeris, Chechens, Ingush, and Lezgins, have been caught up in ethno-political struggle through the diffusion of proactive and reactive nationalism. Political activists in one country usually find sanctuary with and get support from their transnational kinfolk. Generations of Kurdish terrorists in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran have sustained one another's political mobilizations in this way. Likewise, the Chechens outside Russia, descended from the exiles and political refugees of an earlier era, gave open support to their rebellious cousins in the Caucasus. As a rule, a disadvantaged group's potential for political mobilization is increased by the number of segments of the group in adjoining countries, by the extent to which those segments are mobilized and by their involvement in overt conflict (Gurr, 1996: 72).

Contagion, on the other hand, refers to the process by which one group's actions provide inspirations and guidance for other groups elsewhere. While, in general, internal conflicts are by themselves contagious, the strongest force of communal contagion tends to occur within networks of similar groups. Informal connections have developed, particularly since the 1960s, among similar groups that face similar circumstances so that, for instance, New South Wales Aborigines in the early 1960s organized freedom rides, and Dayaks in northern Borneo in the 1980s resisted commercial logging of their forests with rhetoric and tactics remarkably like those used by native Canadians in the early 1990s. In general, groups that are tied into networks acquire better



techniques for effective mobilization: plausible appeals, good leadership, and organizational skills. More importantly, they benefit from the inspiration of successful movements elsewhere, successes that provide the images and moral incentives that motivate activists (Yılmaz, 2007a: 24).

In sum, myriad international actors help shape the aspirations, opportunities, and strategies of ethnic groups in conflict. Thus, the nature of international engagement is a major determinant of whether ethnic conflicts are of short duration or long, and of whether they end in negotiated settlements or humanitarian disasters (Yılmaz, 2005: 15-16).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Several conclusions, as well as lessons with respect to ethnic conflict resolution, can be drawn from the above discussions, summarized as follows:

- Ethnic identity can be said to be a universal phenomenon, but it is not something that can be measured. In the final analysis, the self-attachment to an ethnic group is a matter of personal feeling, which may be subjectively defined based on different criteria.
- Although no one is born with a distinct ethnicity, ones formed, ethnic identity becomes resistant to change, since individual sense of self and ethnic identity are inevitably interrelated. Indeed, a success of an ethnic group uplifts the individuals in that group and a failure hurts them.
- Ethnic identity itself is not a source of inter-group conflict, however. Ethnic identity can motivate a group for political mobilization if the group feel structurally restricted and



perceive its position as unfair under the existing political order. Psychological conditions and international support usually complement structural restrictions during political mobilization.

- Since, the dynamics of ethnic conflicts are usually highly complex, conflict resolution strategies should be multi-sided. In light of the above discussions, ethnic peace making should involve, in most cases, finding successful formulas that enable the expression of distinct group identities, preventing structural and cultural discrimination, democratization, economic development and relatively just distribution of national wealth, confidence building measures aimed at overcoming past traumas and reducing enemy images, as well as a stable international environment.
- Ethnic conflicts are almost always a two or n-party game. Hence, concentrating conflict resolution efforts on one party to the exclusion of others is a no-win strategy. For durable resolution of these conflicts, all related parties must be involved in the peace process.
- Given the complexity of ethnically-driven conflicts, the resolution of such conflicts can be said to be not feasible through the efforts of one particular actor only. Multi-level efforts must be put by different actors, domestic and international. Particularly important is the intervention by humanitarian NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and UN agencies, as these operate with a main aim of peace. Efforts can also be made by regional organizations, nation-states, even individuals, provided that they operate independently of political interests and positively contribute to the peace process.



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