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Correspondence

The Limits to Partition

Michael C. Horowitz
and Alex Weisiger

Carter Johnson

To the Editors (Michael C. Horowitz and Alex Weisiger write):

In his article "Partitioning to Peace: Sovereignty, Demography, and Ethnic Civil Wars," Carter Johnson argues that partition is frequently the best available policy response to ethnic civil wars. By creating a new measure of the degree of demographic unmixing achieved through partition, Johnson demonstrates that mere changes in sovereignty are insufficient to produce peaceful outcomes. He contends, however, that "complete" separation of the two sides will help to bring peace. He concludes that partition is a useful tool for the international peacemaker, with the caveat that it "should be considered, however, only where populations are already largely separated at the time of intervention, or where interveners are prepared to separate groups using mass population transfers."¹ He interprets these findings as "strong evidence for advocates of partition (p. 168)."

We believe that Johnson's caveat is more important than it appears at first blush, and that its practical implication is to render partition an effectively useless policy tool. The partition prescription is grounded in the logic of the ethnic security dilemma, but there is empirical evidence that genuine conflicts of interest exist alongside security dilemma fears. In this context, participants will resist the population transfers necessary for effective partition. Given that the international community is not going to carry out population transfers in the face of violent resistance, effective partition is unlikely to occur except through ethnic cleansing during war. Johnson's data are consistent with these observations: effective partition rarely happens, and when it does, it is through ethnic cleansing rather than organized population transfers. In short, successful partitions ratify military outcomes. Furthermore, when we consider that even effective partition has not guaranteed peace, these observations strongly suggest that the international community should retain its current position toward partition of tacit acquiescence in a small number of unavoidable cases, but should not promote partition as a strategy to end ongoing wars.

The partition prescription is grounded in the logic of the ethnic security dilemma, in which conflict breaks out in an intermixed ethnic setting because each side fears that the other is going to attack it and therefore sees a strategic benefit to striking first. Neutral partition, if possible, is a logical solution to this problem because it eliminates in-

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1. Carter Johnson, "Partitioning to Peace: Sovereignty, Demography, and Ethnic Civil Wars," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Spring 2008), pp. 140–170, at p. 165. Further references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

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centives for preemptive action and facilitates each side's efforts to defend itself. Given these effects, partition logically should be welcomed by participants.²

That observation, however, points to a significant problem with the ethnic security dilemma and the prescription of partition. From Kashmir to Kirkuk, ethnic conflicts have involved not only fear of attack but fundamental disagreements about who should control important pieces of territory. In other words, security motives interact with predation to produce distinct but overlapping incentives for fighting.³ This observation has important implications for the viability of partition as a strategy. Partition depends on outside interveners being willing to facilitate the transfer of populations, which they are reluctant to do given the violations of international law involved (p. 150). If the conflict in question involves not only security fears but competition for control of disputed territory, the international force facilitating partition does not merely act in the context of violence; it becomes a target. As examples such as Somalia in 1993 and Rwanda in 1994 show, there is little historical evidence that outside interveners are willing to suffer these sorts of costs to facilitate an outcome from which they do not directly benefit.

Given competition over territory, voluntary population transfers are also a chimera, which Johnson acknowledges when he states that "all of the complete cases" of partition "involved large-scale forced population transfers during the countries' wars, with the possible exception of Bangladesh."⁴ If the international community will not carry out involuntary transfers and the participants will not accept voluntary ones, then ethnic cleansing—held up by partition advocates as worse than their recommendation—is the only way that population transfers will occur.⁵ From this perspective, advocacy for partition becomes advocacy for signing off on ethnic cleansing after the fact. That is very different than arguing that partition should be a preferable policy choice.

These observations are significant when we turn to Johnson's empirics. Johnson takes issue with Nicholas Sambanis's finding that partition has not been associated with more peaceful postwar outcomes. He argues that this finding did not fairly test the partition argument, because many of the cases that Sambanis coded as partitions did not meet the standards laid out by partition advocates.⁶ Johnson categorizes Sambanis's cases of partition into two groups: those in which partition involved the ethnic separation that theory indicates was necessary, and those in which ethnic unmixing did not accompany the change in sovereignty. Consistent with theory, Johnson finds that the greater the degree of unmixing, the better the postwar outcome, although the strength

2. Chaim D. Kaufmann, "When All Else Fails: Ethnic Population Transfers and Partitions in the Twentieth Century," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 120–156.

3. Jack L. Snyder and Robert Jervis, "Civil War and the Security Dilemma," in Barbara F. Walter and Snyder, eds., *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 15–37.

4. He then goes on to describe how forced population transfers occurred in Bangladesh as well. Johnson, "Partitioning to Peace," p. 163.

5. In this context, it is unsurprising that population transfers for partition have generally been extremely violent. Radha Kumar, "The Troubled History of Partition," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (January/February 1997), pp. 22–34.

6. Johnson, "Partitioning to Peace," p. 143; and Nicholas Sambanis, "Partition as a Solution to Eth-

of this finding is limited by “the statistical problem that, as yet, there have been too few partitions” (p. 160).

The observation that there have been few “complete” partitions is more than just a statistical problem, however. Our theoretical discussion indicates that partition will almost never be a viable policy, at best merely ratifying preexisting military outcomes. Closer examination of the evidence bears that argument out. Of the seventeen cases highlighted by Johnson in the post–World War II era, only six count as complete partitions: the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971, the partition of Cyprus in 1974, the establishment of Eritrea in 1991, the Russian-backed creation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia in 1993 and 1994, and the Armenian acquisition of Nagorno-Karabakh in 1994 (*ibid.*). Setting aside the *sui generis* case of Bangladesh, in which geographical separation between East and West Pakistan limited opportunities for further violence, all of Johnson’s six cases experienced significant involuntary population transfers. The partition of Cyprus involved the disorganized mass transfer of ethnic Greeks and Turks from the two parts of the island, far closer to ethnic cleansing than partition. Similarly, the Armenians cemented their conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh by ethnically cleansing the Azeris, while the Azeris responded by forcing out Armenians in their midst.⁷ In the conflicts in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, large numbers of Georgians (initially the majority in Abkhazia) were ethnically cleansed with the aid of the Russians.⁸ Finally, the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict also featured significant ethnic cleansing, and yet it ended not because of unmixing but because the Soviets withdrew military support for Ethiopia, forcing it into settlement negotiations to ratify the military outcome.⁹

Moreover, the evidence that even “complete” partition limits subsequent violence is exceptionally weak. The partition of Ethiopia was followed only seven years later by a severe interstate war, which in two years killed 100,000 people, roughly two-thirds of the total who died in the decade and a half of the previous war.¹⁰ Johnson acknowledges the problematic nature of this case (pp. 161–162), but it raises the further concern that even should partition prove possible it may not provide the benefits that advocates expect. Furthermore, the fighting in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in August 2008—after the publication of Johnson’s article—underlines the limits of partition in preventing vi-

nic War: An Empirical Critique of the Theoretical Literature,” *World Politics*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (July 2000), pp. 437–483.

7. Human Rights Watch, Cynthia G. Brown and Farhad Karim, eds., *Playing the “Communal Card”: Communal Violence and Human Rights* (New York: Human Rights Watch, April 1995).

8. Human Rights Watch, ed., *Bloodshed in the Caucasus: Violations of Humanitarian Law and Human Rights in the Georgia–South Ossetia Conflict* (New York: Human Rights Watch, March 1992); and Human Rights Watch, *Georgia/Abkhazia: Violations of the Law of War and Russia’s Role in the Conflict* (New York: Human Rights Watch, March 1995).

9. Edmond J. Keller, “The United States, Ethiopia, and Eritrean Independence,” in Amare Tekle, ed., *Eritrea and Ethiopia: From Conflict to Cooperation* (Lawrenceville, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1994), pp. 169–170.

10. The casualty levels undermine Johnston’s claim that postpartition wars will be less serious. That a two-year war had almost two-thirds the casualties of a decade-and-a-half civil war further undermines the claim that postpartition wars will be “better” than postconflict wars in nonpartition situations. On the casualty totals, see Meredith R. Sarkees, “The Correlates of War

olence. Given a total of six “complete” partitions in his data set, the observation of significant fighting in three provides little reason to think that even successful separation of populations will prevent a return to violence.

Of course, part of the appeal of the partition hypothesis is the claim that no other option exists.¹¹ Yet Sambanis’s data, on which Johnson relies, belie this point. To evaluate the efficacy of partition, Johnson focuses on whether war has recurred within two or five years from the time of partition and whether lower-level violence has occurred within those same periods. Of eighty ethnic wars, fifty-seven did not return to war within two years of termination, and fifty-two remained without war after a five-year period. Lower-level violence was more common, but still thirty-two cases avoided even that through the first two years, with thirty-one sustaining peace through five years. Partition is not the only way to achieve peace.

We do not wish to deny that there may well be reason to acquiesce to unpalatable outcomes after the fact. Civil wars are a rough business, and there will inevitably be times when it is preferable to tacitly acquiesce to a new reality than to force a return to the previous situation or to pretend that nothing has changed. But there is a significant difference between tacitly acquiescing when no other option is available and actively promoting those outcomes from the start. The knowledge that the international community will legitimate, or at least accept, ethnic cleansing after the fact provides reason for leaders to consider adopting that policy when they otherwise would not have.¹² In other words, the moral hazard problems with a policy of partition are severe.

Johnson is to be lauded for advancing and empirically substantiating an important revision to the partition argument. We differ from him, however, in the implications of that revision. The rarity of “successful” partitions is, to us, an indicator that partition is not a good prescription. Real partitions are rare because the ethnic security dilemma is not the only source of conflict at work in ethnic civil wars, and predation provides strong incentives to resist the sorts of population transfers that Johnson argues are necessary for partition to work, while even successful partition does not guarantee peace. Far better, then, to recognize what Johnson’s evidence really shows—that partition is truly an option of last resort.

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Data on War: An Update to 1997,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Spring 2000), pp. 123–144.

11. Kaufmann, “When All Else Fails.”

12. James D. Fearon, “Separatist Wars, Partition, and World Order,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Summer 2004), pp. 394–415. Fearon also notes that a general policy of partition would undermine the taboo against encouraging the breakup of opposing states, leading to more conflictual international relations.

Carter Johnson Replies:

I want to begin by thanking Michael Horowitz and Alex Weisiger for their constructive comments. Scholars' understanding of partition has long benefited from precisely this kind of exchange, enabling more informed decisionmaking on a topic that influences millions of civilian lives. My response proceeds with a brief review of the aims and conclusions set forth in my 2008 article,¹ highlighting a fundamental area of agreement between the authors and me. I then move to areas of disagreement, drawing on the data used in my article to demonstrate the policy relevance of partition even if the international community is not prepared to implement forced population transfers.

In my article I argue that "complete" partitions—those that create a separate ethnic homeland and completely separate warring ethnic groups—produced peaceful outcomes for at least the first five years following the end of hostilities. This finding challenges the only previous cross-national study that systematically examined partition and confirmed empirically what partition advocates have long argued.² Given that 60 percent of ethnic civil wars between 1945 and 2004 experienced deadly conflict renewal within the first five years, the benefits of "complete" partition are worthy of policymakers' consideration.³

Horowitz and Weisiger argue that "complete" partition is essentially a "useless policy tool" because civilians will resist forced transfers, and "the international community is not going to carry out population transfers in the face of violent resistance." This is an important point, and I agree that forced population transfers are unlikely to receive support from Western powers. I also agree that this limits the policy usefulness of partition, a fact I acknowledged in my article (p. 167). Still, not all forms of complete partition require the international community to forcibly move civilians to ensure long-term peace.

REDRAWING OF BORDERS

The ethnic security dilemma argues that ethnic groups separate from one another in wartime. Therefore, by the time the international community chooses to act, which can take months and sometimes years, it may not need to engage in forced population transfers because separation may already have been largely accomplished. Instead, the international community can redraw borders to minimize the number of minority groups in the emerging postpartition states.

1. Carter Johnson, "Partitioning to Peace: Sovereignty, Demography, and Ethnic Civil Wars," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Spring 2008), pp. 140–170. Additional references to this article appear in parentheses in the text.

2. This line of thought was initially expressed by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Van Evera. Mearsheimer and Van Evera, "When Peace Means War: The Partition That Dare Not Speak Its Name," *New Republic*, December 18, 1995, pp. 16–21. But it was developed first by Chaim Kaufmann, "Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars," *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Spring 1996), pp. 136–175.

3. I defined "deadly conflict renewal" as renewal of combat leading to at least twenty-five deaths.

Kosovo's partition from Serbia provides a useful example. The 1999 conflict largely separated the ethnic Kosovar and Serb populations, but instead of drawing the borders to reflect this reality, NATO and its partners maintained the prewar institutional borders of the Kosovar autonomous region, leaving a significant Serb minority within the Western-recognized borders of today's Kosovo. That region experienced a large-scale renewal of deadly conflict in May 2004 and remains dangerously unstable today; although officially under the control of Priština, the region is in fact under the partial control of Belgrade. Instead of forcing the Serb populations from Kosovo, the international community could redraw the northern border to allow most of the Serb minority to join rump Serbia. There would still be small Serbian enclaves in Kosovo but, as I argue below, this is unlikely to cause widespread violence.

Evidence from ethnic civil war terminations between 1945 and 2004 suggests that even partitions that leave small numbers of an ethnic minority behind are also successful at maintaining the peace. As I noted in my article, six cases of "complete" partition have occurred since 1945, but this finding was based on a highly restrictive definition of "complete"—those reaching at least 95 percent on the Postpartition Ethnic Homogeneity Index (PEHI) (p. 160). If all of the PEHI scores are ranked from highest to lowest, however, one finds that none of the ten highest-scoring countries experienced a recurrence of conflict in the first five years after the cessation of hostilities (Cyprus 1974, Georgia-Abkhazia 1993, Pakistan-Bangladesh 1971, Georgia-South Ossetia 1992, Ethiopia-Eritrea 1991, Azerbaijan 1994, Bosnia 1995, Yugoslavia-Croatia 1995, Israel 1948, and India 1948). This includes countries with a PEHI score in the 50s (p. 160). In other words, partitions that "largely" (as opposed to "completely") separate ethnic groups are also likely to bring about an enduring peace, making the task for the international community much easier and therefore more practical.

THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF PARTITION

Horowitz and Weisiger also argue that the ethnic security dilemma alone is the grounding logic of partition. I disagree. Although the ethnic security dilemma is a core component part of the partition argument, there are other theoretical bases as well. First, as I mention in the article, Alexander Downes draws on the realist school, emphasizing the importance of establishing separate states to maintain long-term peace (p. 149).⁴ The creation of separate states addresses the fear of each side over the other's intentions even where demographic separation is achieved. Second, establishing separate states solves the problem of credible commitments, because neither side needs to decommission its weapons. The problem of credible commitments has been identified as a central obstacle in ending civil wars.⁵ Third, Thomas Chapman and Phil Roeder recently presented an institutionalist argument to support partition, arguing that independence,

4. Alexander B. Downes, "The Holy Land Divided: Partition as a Solution to Ethnic Wars," *Security Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Summer 2001), pp. 58–116.

5. Barbara F. Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

not autonomy, is most beneficial for establishing long-term peace.⁶ This widened theoretical explanation for partition might explain why complete and near-complete partitions are successful: a combination of both sovereignty and demography is central for the establishment and maintenance of peace after ethnic civil war.

LONG-TERM VERSUS SHORT-TERM PEACE

Finally, Horowitz and Weisiger note that some of the conflicts I examined in my article recurred after the five-year limit. This is a legitimate point, although it occurred in two, not three cases: the “conflict” in Abkhazia in August 2008 caused only one soldier’s death, and therefore does not qualify as renewed, low-level violence or war. In my article I addressed the 1998 Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict, which did cause a great number of deaths, but also ended remarkably quickly (after two years, compared with three decades for the civil war): indeed, interstate wars are typically extremely short relative to civil wars, and this is one key advantage to the “internationalization” of such conflicts. The Georgian-Russian conflict over South Ossetia in August 2008 further illustrates this point: active combat operations ended after only six days. The *de facto* states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have obsequiously pandered to Russian interests since they achieved *de facto* independence in 1992 and 1993, respectively, explicitly recognizing Russia as their only security guarantee against the existential threat posed by Georgia. By building up deterrence, these states aim to avoid war, but this objective could be pursued only as a result of partition. The deterrence capability provided by the region’s only superpower cannot prevent a rash, hot-headed president from launching an ill-fated invasion, but at least the war with South Ossetia ended quickly, and Tbilisi is unlikely to ever attempt such actions in the future. Further, the death count was below 1,000 (combined civilian and combat), meaning that even its label as a “war” is open to dispute.

CONCLUSION

My article aimed to build on the academic debate over partition and to draw out policy implications from those results. I provided a novel methodological approach that clarified the debate and challenged conventional wisdom. I also identified several theoretical strands that support partition as a solution to ethnic civil war.

With regard to policy, Horowitz, Weisiger, and I agree that the international community will not sponsor forced population transfers at this time, and this limits the ability to promote partition as a solution to ethnic civil wars. We differ, however, in how we see the remaining implications for partition as a policy tool. Because ethnic civil wars separate warring ethnic groups, and partitions that largely separate ethnic groups create peaceful solutions, policymakers need to seriously consider drawing fresh borders to separate warring groups as much as possible. Ethnic civil wars have an extremely

6. Thomas Chapman and Phil G. Roeder, “Partition as a Solution to Wars of Nationalism: The Importance of Institutions,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 101, No. 4 (November 2007), pp. 677–691.

high recidivism rate during the first five years, and such violence typically harms civilians the most. Given the promising track record of partition during the same five-year period, it is imperative that policymakers seriously consider this option. They could begin with several ongoing ethnic conflicts, including those involving Israel, Kosovo, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, and Sudan.

—*Carter Johnson*
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