Grievance in Space and Time:

The State, Militias, and the Irredentist Temptation

by Dr. Bradford R. McGuinn

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The armed militia is an emblem of political decay. With the weakening of institutions designed to regulate the ambitions and anxieties of those inhabiting a state, and with the erosion of a political culture meant to confer legitimacy upon the rituals of governance, martial energy once held to constitutional prescription in the service of impersonal public rule can be redirected toward private purpose. Dissenting factions within a governmental structure, groups seeking its overthrow, or militias fighting within society itself challenge the viability of states, stability in their regions, and international order.

This essay will consider ways in which narratives of grievance play dangerously upon the triangular system of mutual obligation that ideally orders interaction between a state, society, and the military. In this configuration of civil-military relations, the state exercises a "legitimate monopoly" on the production of violence, binding militaries to civilian control.[1] Acting as an acid upon the alloy of this triangle, allowing leakage of "privatized" violence, is a dissatisfaction with a configuration of geography, politics, and culture of such intensity that reality can be considered oppressive.

The irredentist impulse arises from a longing to join to common geography members of a national community separated by circumstance. The cartographies of imperialism tempt post-colonial leaders to campaigns of national redemption toward the recovery of "lost lands." So too, groups considering themselves "captured peoples" of another state form movements of national liberation—as was once the case with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front or in the separatist exertions of groups in South Sudan—inducing governments to respond in kind with militias of suppression, sub-contracting the work of counterinsurgency to rival factions.[2] In other words, dividing to rule. Regions such as the Horn of Africa and South Asia remain prisoner to the logic of a dilemma by which the security of one state is purchased with the insecurity of another through the instrumentality of militia sponsorship.[3] The kaleidoscopes of regional actors in such areas shift, but rarely settle. The easing of hostility between Ethiopia and Eritrea—among Africa's oldest irredentist conflicts—gave way to renewed tension between Addis Ababa and the region of Tigray.[4] Longstanding animus with India induced the solicitation of Islamist militias by elements associated with Pakistan for the purpose of giving grief to Indian forces in Kashmir, only to bring menace upon Pakistan's civil society.[5] Meanwhile, the disputed area still serves as a flashpoint for South Asia's two nuclear powers. "And round about I go."[6] Such it has often been for countries and claimants caught in the spiral of militia politics.

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Grief was also associated with the conversion of the old Ottoman lands of Mesopotamia into Britain's creation of "Iraq." The institutionalization of the minority rule of Sunni Arabs set Iraq's nations against its new state with an unhappy harvest of endemic political warfare. After the American invasion in 2003, with the empowerment of Iraq's Shi'a majority, the system devolved into militias of identity. Al-Qaeda and then ISIS fed upon the status anxiety of Iraq's downwardly mobile Sunni. Following a disintegrative logic inherent to militia warfare, the United States would summon Sunni fighters to combat al-Qaeda, and then, in tacit alliance with Iran, find common cause with Shi'a militias and those of the Kurds in an effort to suppress ISIS. Today, the fragmented societies in Iraq and Syria are stronger than their states, fashioning between them an open front for an array of militias and their sponsors.

Irredentists of time, evincing nostalgia for a "golden age," stand among militias oriented toward territory or considerations of pure political power. Al-Qaeda and ISIS, born of a rejection of the state and the states-system imposed by imperialism, sought a return to the virtue and harmony associated with the original community of believers, organizing against the corruptions and humiliations of colonialism and secular modernity therein.[7] With presentations of extreme violence, militant movements frightened states with the specter of systemic collapse. Rulers can then be tempted toward the manufacture of still more militia activity, consigning the de-institutionalized lands of Iraq or Syria, Libya, Mali, and Yemen, to the irredentist designs of militias localized or transnational, and leaving states to decay amplified by the impact of global pandemic. Doubled, then, is the burden faced by populations displaced by conflict, as their dispossession exposes them also to the predations of militias.

The weaponization of grievance and memory in the United States can be seen in the surge of radical right-wing militias.[8] Informed by a longing for the time when their status seemed assured and privileges self-evident, shamed by their reversal in fortune, hostile toward the "usurpers," determined to "take back" a "stolen" government and restore "lost virtue" to the culture, many militia members are enamored of the weapons so widely available in the United States, and able to give ventilation to their views through a social media that holds the community tight to a conspiratorial epistemic space.[9] America's armed militias challenge the "legitimate monopoly" elected authorities are meant to exercise over the use of force, while themselves giving expression to audacious levels of violence. To the vigilante actions of singular figures can be added a legion of "digital warriors" and larger armed formations.

The temptation toward a politics of "purity" can also be counted among the characteristics of militia violence in the name of irredentism.[10] In its territorial form, the redemptive impulse can run toward ethnic cleansing operations in service of doctrines reinforcing arbitrary distinctions between the "clean and the unclean," the "pure and impure."[11] In its nostalgic form, campaigns of eradication with genocidal implications can be seen as

1921 Tulsa Race Riot: Men With Guns in Car // The Beryl Ford Collection/Rotary Club of Tulsa, Tulsa City-County Library and Tulsa Historical Society

prerequisite to the "restoration" of "purity," as the sexual violence perpetrated against Iraq's Yazidi people by ISIS reminds us.[12] The terror inflicted in 1921 upon the African-Americans of Tulsa by white militias represents one of the many examples of racist violence in the United States.[13] The lines between ideational grievance, assertions of brutality for their own sake, or calculations of greed can become blurred, as evidenced in the concatenation of criminal gangs, corruption, and social distress that have made countries in Central America among the world's most deadly, or in the ideological "dirty wars" that serve as predicate for many of the region's travails.[14]

Warriors of time and space have also altered the nature of armed combat. From a concept of war concentrated within a system of states, to a diffused assemblage of fighting factions, the militia is cause and symptom of a complex eco-system of conflict. With blurred distinctions between state and society, military and militia, definitions of "front" and "combatant" become relative.[15] Central to civil wars, militias dominate post-modern wars of identity. Such conflicts can drift toward a self-perpetuating warring for its own sake, where armed bands, sometimes splitting violently through internal competition, safeguard identity through the production of violence within ecologies of vendetta actions akin to the revenge tragedies of pre-modernity.

Sophisticated military doctrines and weapons of major powers now exist for the prosecution of hybrid war, in which militias, with their ever-shifting alliances, integrate into operational battle concepts.[16] "Deconfliction zones" in the Syrian war allow states to avoid coming to blows amidst contending militias. "Targeted assassination," often through the agency of unmanned aircraft, allow killing at physical distance while insulating states from the moral implications of shadow wars, with their renditions, detentions, and "eliminations."

Where societal-centric enemy militias supplement state-centric threats, countries engage degrading operations against armed groups that cannot be defeated in a conventional sense: fighting not to win, but to periodically weaken, or even sustain adversaries, should their sequel be considered of greater menace.[17] In Afghanistan or Somalia, "long wars" have been fought by major powers against militias in the name of strategic denial to Taliban or al-Shabaab, with neither a promise of victory nor extravagant hopes for stabilization. The grafting of local grievance to the transcending message of ISIS in the Southern Philippines, or Northern Nigeria's struggle with Boko Haram, provides further illustration of the ambiguous and intractable nature of militia warfare.[18] The problematic politics of "threat," concomitant to

ill-structured conflicts and animated by anxiety over "invisible militias," tempts societies toward ontological soothing through securitization moves against often arbitrarily defined threats-in-waiting.[19]

How to still this wheel of fire, and "make life gentile in *this* world"?[20] Fundamental will be institutional viability, with support from a culture that centers dispute in the legitimacy of time and place. Settled democracies will face a challenge to maintain an orderly system of obligation between state, society, and armed forces, denying space to militias of malign grievance. In unsettled countries, from Yemen to Afghanistan, where the grievances of societies overwhelm the state and corrupt its institutions, the problem will need to be accepted as complex in causation.[21] Conundrums of place and time, some rooted in tangible material conditions, and others of inconsolable ideation, constitute symptoms of maladies interdependent upon one another. Income and educational opportunity, public safety, trust in community, institutional repair, sustained international engagement that calms damaged systems more than it aggrieves, are all among the challenges facing our wounded world.

Speaking many years ago of the limits to global cooperation, Reinhold Niebuhr cautioned that while the international system was "not lacking in social tissue," it was "very scant," as it must seem to us today.[22] But it was Niebuhr, Barack Obama's "favorite philosopher," who told us too that we "are not prisoners of historical destiny," providing hope that decay can be reversed, creating an environment in which violent militias are demobilized, states are re-stated, and grievance plays less dangerously upon society.[23]

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[1]See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1957). Huntington offers the foundational statement on the matter of civilian control. Of course, generations of scholarship have since engaged the subject of civil-military relations.
[2]See, for example, W. J. Berridge, "Briefing: The Uprising in Sudan," *African Affairs* 119 (1) (2020): 164-176.
[3]Two works by Shiping Tang on the venerable "security dilemma" construct could be helpful here., "The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis," *Security Studies* 18 (3) (2009): 587-623; and "The Onset of Ethnic War: A General Theory," *Sociological Theory* 33 (3) (2015): 256-279.
[4]See Tefera Negash Gebregziabher, "Ideology and Power in TPLF's Ethiopia: A Historic Reversal in the Making?" *African Affairs* 118 (472) (2019): 463-484. For reporting on tensions in the Tigray region, see, for example, Simon Marks and Declan Walsh, "On 'Rooftop of Africa,' Ethiopia's Troops Hund Fugitive Former Rulers," *The New York Times*, January, 22 2021.
[5]See Paul Staniland, "Militias, Ideology, and the State," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* (August 2015): 770-793.
[6]Very much out of context are taken these lines from A. A. Milne's *Busy*.
[7]The literature here is considerable. See, for example, R. Kim Cragin, "A Recent History of Al-Qa'ida," *The Historical Journal*, V. 57, N. 3 (September 2014): 803-824. See too, Simon Cottee, 'What ISIS Really Wants' Revisited: Religion Matters in Jihadist Violence, but How?" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, V. 40, N. 6 (2017): 439-454.
[8]The literature on the American radical right is vast. Foundational works include Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America*, 1790-1970 (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); and Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right* (Criterion Books, 1955).
[9]See Thomas B. Edsall, "The QAnon Delusion Has Not Loosened Its Grip," *The New York Times*, February 3, 2021. And Max Fisher, "White Terrorism Shows "Stunning' Parallels to Islamic State's Rise," *The New York Times*, August 5, 2019.
[10]Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Routledge, 1966). While not engaging the subject of political violence, essential insight can be gained from Douglas's work.
[11]See Robbie Duschinsky, "Purity, Power and Cruelty," *Critique of Anthropology* 31 (4) (2011): 312-328.
[12]See Sheri P. Rosenberg, "Genocide is a Process, Not an Event," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 7 (1) (Spring 2012): 16-23. And Payam Akhavan, et al., "What Justice for the Yazidi Genocide? Voices from Below," *Human Rights Quarterly*, V. 42, N. 3 (August 2020): 573-593. For a recent "audit" of the terror experienced by the Yazidi peoples of Iraq, see Jane Arraf, "With a Mass Funeral, Yazidi Survivors Honor Victims of ISIS," *The New York Times*, February 7, 2021.
[13]The literature here is too exhaustive to itemize. For a recent discussion, see Brent Staples, "The Burning of Black Wall Street, Revisited," *The New York Times*, June 19, 2020.
[14]See Azam Ahmed, 'Either They Kill Us or We Kill Them," *The New York Times*, May 13, 2019. And Gabriel Aguilera Peralta and John Beverly, "Terror and Violence as Weapons of Counterinsurgency in Guatemala," *Latin American Perspectives* 7 (2, 3) (Spring/Summer 1980): 91-113.
[15]See Martin Van Creveld, The Transformation of War (New York: The Free Press, 1991). For the spatial aspect of war in urban areas, see Stephen Graham, "The Urban Battlespace," Theory, Culture and Society 26 (7-8) (2009): 278.
[16]For a discussion of hybrid war in the Russian context, see Dmitry Dima Adamsky, "The Impact of the Russian Operation in Syria on Hezbollah's Operational Art: A Hypothesis," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 43 (5) (2020): 414-430.
[17]For a discussion of a "degrading strategy," see Efraim Inbar and Eitan Shamir, "'Mowing the Grass': Israel's Strategy for Protracted Intractable Conflict," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37 (1) (2014): 65-90.
[18]See Ben C. Solomon and Felipe Vallamor, "In City of Ruins, Philippines' Battle Against ISIS Rages On," *The New York Times*, September 1, 2017. And Zacharias P. Pieri, "Under the Black Flag of Borno: Experiences of Foot Soldiers and Civilians in Boko Haram's 'Caliphate'," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 56 (4) (2018): 645-672.
[19]See Deepa Kumar, "Terrorcraft: Empire and the Making of the Racialised Terrorist Threat," *Race and Class* 62 (2) (2020): 34-60.
[20]In impertinent fashion, emphasis is added to the line from the poet Aeschylus.
[21]See Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 4 (2) (June 1973): 155-169.
[22]Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Illusion of World Government," *Foreign Affairs* 27 (3) (April 1949): 386.
[23]Ibid., 388.

Bradford R. McGuinn holds a Ph.D. in international studies, with a concentration in Middle Eastern studies, from the University of Miami. Dr. McGuinn is a Senior Lecturer with the Department of Political Science and Director of the Master Arts in International Administration program at the University of Miami. His fields of research and teaching include Middle Eastern studies, international security, civil-military relations and political violence. He has contributed recent book chapters dealing with security questions in Latin America, West Africa, the Middle East, and the Caucasus.