

CHAPTER FIVE

Separatists Were the First Intergroup Conflict Category That I Studied

AS I BEGAN looking at the various kinds of intergroup conflicts that exist in various countries, the easiest category of groups in conflicted status for me to see were the groups who echoed what I had seen on that sunny day in Wales — countries where at least one subset of the national population had its own sense of group identity and its own sense of group turf and also wanted some level of group autonomy.

I could see fairly easily that there were a number of countries where one or more groups of people wanted to spin off and form their own independent country.

Some of those groups who wanted independent status have had that set of separatist interests and aspirations literally for centuries.

I didn't need to look far from Wales to find other groups with similar separatist aspirations. In close proximity — within Great Britain — I learned that both Northern Ireland and Scotland had people with a separate group identity who wanted more autonomy for their own group.

I talked at that point to people from Scotland who told me they wanted some level of independence from England. I talked to people in Northern Ireland who saw England to be a mortal enemy to their people and who wanted very much to be free of British rule.

Separatist groups on the British Isles were easy to find — and they each had very similar feelings and goals relative to the future status of their groups.

It Was Easy to Find Separatist Groups

It also wasn't hard to look beyond the British Isles to see a number of other countries who had similar internal separatist movements and pressures. Again, the patterns were easy to see once I learned what the patterns were.

In each of the separatist settings that I found, I could see that there was an overall multi-ethnic or multi-tribal nation that is currently basically controlled by one majority tribal group and I could see that there was embedded in that nation at least one smaller ethnic group — generally with a different historical tribal language — that would like to have more autonomy as a group.

When I looked at the countries with separatist issues, it was obvious that the people in the smaller ethnic groups that were embedded in each of those larger countries very much wanted to separate their group into a separate nation that would run its own government. It was equally obvious to me in each setting that the national leaders of the overall country that those smaller groups are part of today clearly intend to keep their countries intact and it was clear that those national leaders have basically no interest in ever allowing that separation by the smaller group to happen.

The larger ethnic groups that run each of those countries had had a long history of prevailing over their separatist populations.

The Basque, for example, have been unsuccessful separatists in a couple of countries for a number of centuries. The Basque in each setting want to have their own country and their own turf.

Basque separatists periodically set off bombs and kill people from the other group to argue in favor of their separation.

The Catalonians and the government of Spain have very similar sets of local autonomy aspirations, desires, and issues. When I spent time in Barcelona, many of the people I talked to there made it very clear — with some passion — that they are not Spanish.

Then when I talked to leaders in Spain, they were equally clear that they believe Barcelona is and always will be a part of Spain and those leaders speak with some disdain of the people who want to split part about Spain away from Spain.

The instinctive Alpha turf protection issues that I have seen now in many settings — where Alpha leaders in any setting or situation almost always have a very hard time giving up any of their turf — are clearly activated for national leaders in Spain.

Key Spanish leaders have explicitly and firmly rejected Barcelonan independence. Those national Spanish leaders comfortably ignore and reject the fact and idea that many of the people of Barcelona do want to be “set free.”

Those issues are actually currently growing in intensity. Some leading separatists in Barcelona want to hold local elections to vote on becoming an independent country. As I am writing this chapter, the Spanish leaders have rejected that process and have challenged the legality of those votes.

As I looked at separatist movements in several countries, it was clear to me in each of those settings that the national leaders very consistently want to retain their national boundaries and complete national turf and that the separatist groups in each setting want the borders of the country to reflect the areas that would give tribal control of what they perceive to be historically inherent tribal turf to their own tribal group.

The Kurds Epitomize Autonomy Frustration

The turf issues and basic tribal identity and autonomy issues tend to blend together for both sets of people in each of those settings. There are long-standing ethnic minorities in each country who want to be free and there are majority groups in each country who do not want any part of their country's turf lost to anyone in any way.

In that vein, The Kurds may be the clearest example of that kind of ethnic conflict in the world.

I had no basic awareness of the Kurdish issues in any setting when I started doing my specific research into intergroup conflicts and separatist movements. The Kurds, however, were very easy to see once I started looking for internal groups who wanted autonomy in any nation.

There are large numbers of Kurds in a couple of major countries who very much want some level of local Kurdish autonomy in each setting.

The primary majority ethnic group that rules each of those countries and the Alpha leaders from the local majority group who actually run the government of each of those countries have been equally determined for centuries not to allow the Kurds to spin any part of their territory off into the status of a separate Kurdish nation.

Us/Them instincts and turf instincts are fully activated by all parties in each of those settings. Governments in Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, and Iran have all intentionally taken very clear and explicit anti-Kurdish steps — including periodically banning the Kurdish language and forbidding assemblies of people who want to meet to discuss Kurdish separatist agendas.

In very basic instinct-guided “Us/Them” behaviors, the majority tribes in each of those countries have often tried very directly in various ways to make the Kurdish culture, itself, disappear.

Turkish Pilots Bombed a Kurd Village

One of the newspaper headlines I read when I was in Istanbul celebrated the fact that the Turkish Air Force had just done a bombing raid against a Kurdish village the day before. The Air Force had bombed that village on the grounds that the village might have had separatist leaders hiding in it on the day of the raid.

Knowing how our us/them instincts dehumanize other groups of people, I was not surprised to read in that local Istanbul newspaper that the Turkish Air Force had been willing to drop bombs on Kurdish villages full of women and children just for a chance to kill a visiting separatist leader.

I believe to my core, however, that the same Turkish Air Force pilots who dropped those bombs on those villages that day would not have dropped those same bombs on a village that was occupied only by Turkish women and Turkish children in the hopes of killing a strong Kurd leader who might be visiting in that setting on that day.

Those Turkish pilots would have believed they were committing a crime against humanity by bombing their own people on the potential choice of killing a key visiting Kurd. The Turkish pilots, however, considered the deaths of the Kurdish civilians in the Kurdish villages to be unfortunate but entirely justified “collateral damage” because all of the Kurds in those settings were perceived by the pilots to be a “Them.”

We obviously treat us and them “collateral damage” with very different ethical standards. Military behavior across the planet echoes those ethics. The Turkish Air Force bombed the village full of Kurds with no guilt, but I believe that those very same pilots would literally have refused an order from their leaders to drop those same bombs on villages that were inhabited only by Turks.

That is a set of beliefs, behaviors, thought processes, and values that we often see in war settings.

We Firebombed Dresden and Tokyo

We Americans dropped atomic bombs on Japanese cities and we Americans firebombed both Japanese and German cities in World War II. We dropped a stunning hellfire of bombs on the women and children of Dresden, Germany, for example, and we saluted and celebrated the people who dropped those bombs.

We could drop those horrible bombs on those entire cities with no guilt at that point in our history because Germany was a “Them” to us at that moment in time. So were the Japanese. Dresden and Hiroshima are both out of the “Them” category for us today.

Dresden and Hiroshima are both now “Us” cities. So I personally believe that members of our military today also would not obey an order to kill mass groups

of people with walls of hellfire in either of those Japanese or German cities today.

I have been in Hiroshima and I visited ground zero for that bomb. It is hard to imagine how much damage we were willing to do when we considered the people on the ground in that site to be a Them.

In Istanbul, I saw that the Turkish Air Force dropped their own bombs on the women and the children who lived in that village and the newspaper articles celebrated the possibility that they might have killed a Kurd separatist leader in the process.

Separatists Are Often Labeled “Terrorists”

The Turkish authorities and the local news media made reference to the targeted Kurdish leader as a terrorist and not as a separatist. That specific language choice and that very negative label is used in many separatist settings to describe the people who want to separate.

“Terrorists” is a term that clearly and easily invokes us/them instinctive reactions in all of us. I saw that language used consistently for the separatist groups in several of the countries I looked at.

The separatist groups in every country tend to be defined by themselves to themselves as being patriots and heroes of some kind. The separatist groups are an “Us” to their fellow tribe members. Those same separatist groups are considered by the ethnic majority group leaders in each country to be a special, focused evil, and damaging category of “Them.”

Their group and individual actions as separatists that happen in each country in pursuit of independence tend to be defined as acts of terrorism rather than as acts of group patriotism and tribal heroism by whoever runs each country.

To be fair, that label as terrorists has been earned in a number of the separatist settings by the fact that some of the more avid separatists do, in fact, set off bombs, start fires, and even poison people in some settings when they are trying to achieve their separatist goals.

Both sides, in those settings, have people whose us/them instincts are activated to the level where they feel the other party is a “Them” and where they depersonalize “Them” to the point of feeling no guilt in doing damage to “Them.”

Separatist Groups Want Autonomy and Turf

I saw in my direct research into separatist group situations in various countries that the separatists in multiple settings actually can end up being oppressed and suppressed by the majority tribe or the majority ethnic group in their nation.

It was clear that there were often very clear intentions to defeat, imprison, and even kill the separatists on the part of the people whose tribe or ethnic group is in power in each of those settings.

Both parties in those settings can act in very guilt free and even evil ways when the full set of us/them instincts is activated in each group of people.

Many Multi-Tribal Nations Have Separatist Groups

There actually are a significant number of those kinds of separatist groups in various countries.

What I saw when I began studying that particular issue was that there are separatist groups in Mexico, Sri Lanka, India, China, Russia, Indonesia, the Congo, Syria, Nigeria, and just about every truly multi-tribal nation.

The minority separatist tribes in each area want autonomy and they want freedom. Each separatist group wants to spin off and control their tribal piece of group turf.

That ability to become an independent tribal nation almost never happens. The likelihood of the Mohawk Indians being allowed to secede from Canada is extremely low. The Tamilese with intense separatist ambitions have died by the thousands for years — and their likelihood of achieving Tamilese autonomy is currently at a low point.

Northern Ireland has gone through those cycles a dozen times — and until the separatist agenda for the people who have those aspirations is somehow satisfied, the cycle is highly likely to continue and begin again when the energy levels build to critical mass and an inflammatory incident of some kind occurs.

That is the exact pattern and most common outcome that exists in most places where those kinds of separatist groups exist. The Kurds will never give up on their desire to achieve autonomy until they achieve autonomy.

What I could see when I looked at each of those situations was that no governments in power in any setting ever voluntarily allow pieces of their current turf to become independent and autonomous pieces — even when the people who occupy that specific subset of their turf clearly want their group freedom and even when the people who want to be free in each setting can generally make substantive historic claims for wanting to be autonomous and free.

Government Leaders Everywhere Instinctively Want to Keep All Turf Intact

I had not fully appreciated how attached we are to our national boundaries in their exact current form before I began doing the work of looking at separatist movements in countries. Boundaries for nations, I learned, generate very high levels of energy at a very instinct-laden level.

We place so much instinctive power as nations into our sense of protecting the exact current territory border definition and the explicit current national boundaries that exist today that nations will often go to great lengths to keep separatists or any one else from spinning off any piece of what government leaders in any setting perceive to be “our” national turf.

International Law Is Heavily Skewed to Protect Current Boundaries

International law is skewed heavily in favor of keeping all existing national boundaries intact — whatever those boundaries may be. People talk with great

conviction about ensuring and protecting the “sanctity” of current national boundaries as though those boundaries have some underlying spiritual justification, sacred foundation, and both moral and ethical underpinnings.

The news media generally writes about the current boundaries of nations as though those boundaries have inherent and even sacramental legitimacy and as though each current boundary needs and deserves to be protected and enforced at any cost as an obvious moral obligation with full international legitimacy and support.

Our turf instincts have clearly been extended to legitimize defense and maintenance of whatever current boundaries have come into being.

Pundits scoff at possible boundary changes as being “sectarian solutions” to problems and the context used for that term by the people who use it generally implies that “sectarian” is a bad thing to be. I have heard both journalists and senior policy makers refer to “sectarian issues” in terms of contempt — sounding like they were speaking of clearly reprehensible motivations if sectarian motive are involved.

Sectarian can actually be a useful, practical, measurable, and functional thing to be — but the label is usually used in pejorative ways and sectarian thinking isn’t looked at as part of the solution strategy for ending local conflict in most settings.

Some National Boundaries Made More Sense

To be fair, there was a time for much of the world when the national boundaries that were in place in most settings actually made more sense. The boundary of Sweden made sense because it defined the area where Swedes lived and where Swedes governed Swedes. The boundary of France similarly defined the homeland of the French. Those boundaries felt right to people at multiple levels.

But the boundary that exists today for the nation called Kenya is not a natural and normal national boundary for any group of people. There is no Kenyan people. There are only an array of local ethnic groups and entirely

separate tribes that have been forced to co-exist inside the artificial boundary that was created by the end of colonialism for that piece of ethnically complex shared turf. There is no logical Kenyan boundary, so using international forces to protect a current Kenyan boundary actually makes much less sense than local people protecting the boundary of Sweden or Japan or Austria.

Bangladesh Managed to Become Autonomous

Unfortunately, we apply the same set of international legitimacy and multi-national support to the boundary of Kenya that we apply to the borders of Sweden. What I learned in looking at those separatist issues was that all countries in all settings tend to support keeping all current boundaries in place, no matter how non-sensical those current boundaries and national definitions may be.

There are very few exceptions to that process.

There have been some exceptions to that rule. Bangladesh was an exception. Separatists in Bangladesh did achieve autonomy. One of the very few full and successful spinoffs of a separatist group in a nation who did manage to turn a piece of tribal turf into a separate autonomous ethnic nation was Bangladesh.

That spinoff for that tribe from Pakistan into becoming a separate Bangladesh nation only happened in that setting because the Bengal tribe who wanted autonomy from Pakistan was literally separated by many miles and by the physical turf of another country from the other ethnic groups in Pakistan who were, in the belief model of the Bengalis, oppressing the Bengal tribe.

Even with a thousand miles of turf separation and with obvious logistical reasons for the separation to happen, that effort to give the Bengal tribe local autonomy was extremely painful.

More than 1 million people died in the very clearly intertribal war that was needed to break up that country. Bangladesh achieved autonomy from Pakistan in the end, but achieved that autonomy at a great cost in lives.

And even though it was clear at multiple logistic and operational levels that Pakistan should not be ruling over that far distant Bengali turf, international law supported Pakistan in its efforts to maintain that control.

In most purely local separatist settings, however, the usual result is that the majority tribe in each country prevails — and the local majority tribe prevails with the clear and explicit support from all of the other multi-ethnic countries in the world whose leaders very much do not want to encourage ethnic independence of any kind inside of their own national borders.

National Leaders from Other Countries Support Current Boundaries

That unanimous level of support for current boundaries by national leaders surprised me when I first observed it and then it made sense for multiple reasons.

National leaders from other countries, I could see, are almost always unanimous in support of government efforts to suppress ethnic autonomy movements in any other countries because those leaders do not want to encourage any separatist activities in their own countries.

Most nations tend to support “the full sanctity of national borders” in large part because the current leaders in most nations do not want their own borders internally challenged.

That means that when separatist leaders in any setting do achieve some level of local control by rebellion or force of arms, the other countries of the world tend not to accept the new nations as nations. It can be very difficult for a portion of a country to secede and be accepted as a fellow nation by the other nations in the world.

Separatists and Government Leaders Both Use Force

I could also see that both sides resort too often to violence in many troubled intergroup settings where some people want their own turf.

In too many of those multi-ethnic settings, the people who are separatists feel justified in bombing and damaging whoever they perceive to be oppressing their group and stealing their group turf. The Tamil Tigers want to be independent so badly that they have been willing to both die and kill for that cause... and they have been armed and dangerous for years in pursuing those interests.

The Tigers are periodically defeated by the larger local tribe — and those defeats obviously never actually end the issue. The separatists just postpone fighting and delay active contention and confrontation to a later point in time when they have regained enough strength to reopen the issues.

Having Separate Languages Enhances Separatist Thinking

As I looked in the context of my process improvement data gathering efforts for patterns, common circumstances, or relevant shared factors or situations that created and sustained those kinds of intergroup conflicts, it was also clear to me very quickly that having a separate tribal language always adds to the sense of tribal separation and tribal division inside a country.

Multi-lingual countries, I could see, tend to have internal separatist energies and internal stress points that last in those settings as long as the multi-lingual reality exists for that setting.

Even in Belgium — where each of the two major tribal language groups already has significant levels of political control over their own most relevant geography — I could see when I started to look at the basic intergroup issues there that was continued and significant animosity between the two language groups that functioned in that country at a very primal and instinctive level.

There are people in both ethnic groups in that country today who want to split Belgium into two countries based on their group languages. When I talked to people in Belgium about their perceived need and desire to be separate entities, the animosity levels that exist between the groups for some of the people who live there were painfully clear.

Again — looking entirely from the outside — it seems hard to imagine how either part of Belgium would benefit in any significant way from splitting off into a separate state. But the people who want that split to happen based entirely and explicitly on local language use have deep instinctive energies pushing in that direction and I could see that those instinctive energies were affecting people's thought processes and emotions in Belgium in very clear and obvious ways.

A good friend of mine has been a fairly senior negotiator who had been working to keep that country together. His frustration levels have been significant and his patience has been extreme. The separatists there very much want to separate — and that goal to be divided into tribal turf feels very right to each separatist in that setting at a very instinctive level.

All of the Major Multi-Ethnic Countries Have Separatist Movements

All of the major multi-ethnic countries that have significant internal groups with a sense of their own identity, their own history, and their own sense of group destiny trigger those kinds of separatist behaviors. Russia has literally dozens of groups that would like more autonomy. India has dozens as well. China has several.

Indonesia and Sri Lanka have groups with so much separatist energy that they have their own tribal militias and those groups and their captive armies present the national government with fully armored and semi-autonomous regions now. Those issues are described in more detail later in this book.

Scotland and Barcelona

It has been fascinating to watch the separatist energies play out and manifest themselves in the old separatist settings. Because we are living in a world where the collapse of colonial powers and the end of the Soviet Union created many new countries with major internal separatist activities, some of the older separatist groups are being re-energized. That is happening in both Scotland and Barcelona. The Scots actually just held a national referendum to decide whether or not to secede from the United Kingdom.

Similar autonomy referendums have been conducted in two of the provinces of The Ukraine and in two provinces of Georgia. In those cases, the provinces that held elections to determine whether they wanted to leave their current country were areas occupied by people whose primary language was Russian rather than Georgian or Ukrainian.

Those kinds of elections are a new development — and they create another set of strategies for separatist groups to use in various settings.

In Barcelona, the current separatist groups are trying to hold a referendum to vote on whether Barcelona should become a separate country. The elected head of the current provincial government in Barcelona favors that agenda and is trying to set up that election. The elected heads of the central government in Spain are very clearly opposed to having Barcelona leave Spain or to even to hold a local vote on the possibility.

During the Scottish independence vote, the head of the Spanish government made an attempt to influence that vote against separation and he announced that an independent Scotland might not be admitted into the European Union.

At that same time, a number of people in Barcelona were publically flying Scottish flags in symbolic sympathy for that separatist referendum effort in Scotland.

The Scottish vote ended up with a clear, but not overwhelming, majority of Scots deciding not to separate. The polls had briefly showed a majority of Scots

in favor of separation, but the final vote in Scotland had almost a 9 percent majority for not separating.

The British government won the vote against full autonomy for Scotland by promising the Scottish people partial autonomy — so the Scots who want to be self-governing have achieved at least part of their objective.

Autonomy Elections Are a New Development

One fascinating thing about that vote in Scotland is that having those kinds of elections to determine local autonomy is another very recent set of developments. People have not been allowed in any settings until fairly recently to hold votes on those issues. Those elections have not happened because the central governments that control those countries have not wanted to live with the outcomes of those votes.

In looking at all of the factors that are affecting intergroup interactions in the world today, having actual votes that give local people some voice in their governance and in the relative autonomy of their tribal group is a new approach for the separatist strategies. Scotland had not been able to vote on that issue for hundreds of years. That vote finally did happen and the people of Scotland were allowed to collectively determine their tribal fate. They decided not to separate.

The recent local autonomy votes in countries adjacent to Russia actually had different outcomes. Local votes in Georgia and in The Ukraine have been held that made it clear that local separatists who were Russian-speaking people in those settings wanted to leave both of those countries and move their piece of those countries back to a country led by their original Russian ethnic group.

I describe those efforts more fully in the chapter of this book that deals with the collapse of the Soviet Union. It has been fascinating to see all of the tribal behaviors play out in those settings.

Other countries around the world who have strong internal separatist movements may want to set up similar processes that will create more local autonomy. Those kinds of votes could create local nations with more tribal

alignment and less intertribal conflict — but they are not likely to happen spontaneously in any setting. We would need both the United Nations and a number of other powerful nations to support that process and to structure that process well in order to make it a success.

This book describes those sets of issues in a later chapter.

Separatists Everywhere Echo One Another

My experiences in Wales started me down a fascinating learning process. I began to understand some basic sets of intergroup situations and intergroup behavior patterns by focusing on the nations that had internal separatist movements and learning about their behaviors, thought process, and history.

Once I learned to recognize a set of basic patterns that stem from all of those very basic and consistent intergroup instinctive behaviors, I found the learning curve about those situations and settings to be both clear and consistent.

Each Separatist Group Has Its Own Identity and Destiny

It was clear to me fairly quickly that the separatists I talked to in every setting sounded very much like the separatists I heard in every other setting. The intergroup issues that I saw in each setting tended to be echoes of each other in each setting.

Each group who wants to separate has its own clear sense of identity and its own sense of group destiny — and each has its own mission as a group that is built on that identity and on their sense of collective mission as a people.

The future of all of those separatist agendas in all of those settings is unclear. Many will probably succeed. There is a growing sense on the part of people who think about national issues that there might be some legitimacy and even value to allowing separatist groups in a number of settings to actually separate... so the future in that regard may turn out to be significantly different than the past.

People who used to find that thought process of allowing selective local autonomy to be pure policy heresy and almost sinful thinking are beginning to

see that could be some legitimacy and significant potential benefit from creating smaller nations in some settings that make more sense from a tribal or ethnic perspective.

We Need Solutions That Work for the New Multi-Ethnic Nations

That energy isn't being triggered as much by the traditional and long-standing separatist groups like the Barcelonans or the Basque as it is by the horrific intertribal messes that are happening in so many of the newly formed multi-ethnic countries that used to be either colonies or satellite nations and now have independence and their own sets of internal issues.

The solutions that will be needed for some of the multi-ethnic former colonies may have spillover impact that could benefit Barcelona, the Basque, and even the Kurds.

The Kurds are having their own renaissance of growing autonomy in general settings based on growing conflicts between Shiite and Sunni tribes in their geography. The battles between the other tribes in several settings have given the Kurds in Iraq and Syria and even Turkey a chance to increase their own local turf control.

The Kurds in those settings need to walk a tightrope between increasing their tribal turf control and antagonizing or threatening the leaders of the other countries with large Kurdish populations.

The end game for the Kurds for all of that ethnic churn in all of those settings could well be favorable to the Kurds in several settings.

All of those issues are relevant to the former colonial countries and to the former satellite countries who have major interethnic conflict issues to resolve.

Freed Colonies and Freed Satellites Need Pathways to Internal Peace

As I learned about those sets of issues in the old separatist settings, I could see that there were even bigger sets of major intergroup issues — including whole new sets of separatist initiatives — in almost all of the new multi-ethnic national

settings that have been created by the end of colonialism and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Most of the traditional separatists in most of the long-standing national separatist settings have failed — suppressed by the country they are embedded in — but it was increasingly clear to me that the whole issue of intergroup interactions was becoming a huge issue in a growing array of settings.

I started my study of intergroup issues, problems, and challenges at a time when the intergroup issues, problems, and challenges were increasing at exponential rates.

There has never been a time when those issues were more appropriate to study. We live in changing historical times — and we are moving from a world where nations did battle with other nations to a new world where nations across the planet are at war with themselves.

Civil wars are everywhere. There are more than 200 current ethnic conflicts happening in the world today — and more than 90 percent of them are happening inside the borders of nations — creating civil wars in multiple settings.

The Ukraine, Sri Lanka, and Syria all have tribes at war with other tribes and committing all of the sins that are committed when our worst sets of tribal instincts are activated in the worst ways.

I started my learning process at a perfect time because the field of study in my direct focus was exploding.