

Citation: Christopher W. Hale and David S. Siroky, 'Irredentism', in *Encyclopedia of Nationalism*, Eds. G. Krasniqi, J. Hearn and D. Halikiopolou, London: Edward Elgar.

Abstract: Opportunities for irredentism exist whenever members of the same ethnic group are divided across state borders but only occurs when one state seeks to annex territory with its ethnic kin across an international boundary to create a unified nation-state. Potential cases are pervasive, although irredentism is relatively rare. Studies suggests that irredentism is more likely in more ethnically homogeneous with winner-take-all political systems and where there is status inconsistency between demographic majority and minority groups in the retrieving state due to relative economic parity. Political institutions, particularly majoritarian democracies and military dictatorships, can make irredentism more likely due to conflicts over the distribution of public goods and services.

Keywords: Irredentism, ethnic conflict, nation-states, status inconsistency, majoritarian democracies, military dictatorships, political borders, territorial conflict

Irredentism

Irredentism occurs when a nation-state seeks to annex territory with ethnic kin from a neighboring state. Its manifestations range from saber-rattling rhetorical claims to full-scale armed invasions (Horowitz 1985, Saideman and Ayres 2000, Siroky and Hale 2017, Cederman et al. 2022, Hale and Siroky 2023). The potential for irredentism exists anytime nations are divided by state boundaries. While the opportunities for it are abundant, its actualization is rare. From the Italian "irredenta" (unredeemed), the term was used to characterize the effort to bring Italian speakers in neighboring Austria-Hungary and Switzerland into Italy proper. Another infamous example of irredentism is Nazi Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia. Ongoing cases include China's position vis-à-vis Taiwan, India's and Pakistan's reciprocal claims to Kashmir, Somalia's assertions regarding parts of Kenya and Ethiopia, Armenia's involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh, Serbia's efforts to claim Republika Srpska, Ireland's to Northern Ireland, and of course Russia's rhetoric and armed engagement in Ukraine.

Although more recent scholarship has deployed more quantitative approaches, earlier insights remain pertinent. Horowitz's *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, for example, postulated that irredentism "is the prerogative of homogeneous states" (1985, p. 282). Ethnically diverse countries are less likely to engage in irredentism because other ethnic groups are far less likely to favor waging war to annex a territory and people that would tilt the domestic balance further toward the majority group and away from their own group. Horowitz's also notes that irredentism requires mutual attraction, meaning that if ethnic kin in the neighboring territory do not wish to be retrieved, because they are relatively better off in their current country, then irredentist action is also less likely.

More recent studies have sought to provide empirical tests of these and other hypotheses. Saideman and Ayers (2000) utilized Minorities at Risk data to analyze the conditions under which minority ethnic groups are more or less likely to support being retrieved through irredentism. Their results point to 'contagion effects', which indicate that ethnic groups may develop secessionist and/or irredentist sensibilities as a result either of spillover effects (where

the displacement of peoples from one country alters the ethnic balance of power in another) or through demonstration effects (where groups learn new ideas and strategies by observing their neighbors). They find limited influence for many theorized factors, including relative group size, regime type, the economic condition of minority groups, ethnic heterogeneity, and political-economic discrimination (Saideman and Ayres 2000).

Siroky and Hale (2017) shows that economic disparities between ethnic groups within the irredentist state are critical due to ‘status inconsistency’. When the largest ethnic group finds itself near economic parity with minority groups, rather than in an economically dominant position, its members may feel resentment about their middling status and wish to remove the disparity between their political and economic positions through irredentism. Irredentism offers the state an opportunity to deliver a nationalist victory to the ethnic majority, sating its resentment, even if it cannot deliver economically. Siroky and Hale (2017) also demonstrate that the effect of ethnic homogeneity on the likelihood of irredentism is contingent on electoral rules. Specifically, ethnic homogeneity matters under majoritarian rules because it allows the largest ethnic group to advance its agenda with the least resistance from other groups. These new findings stem from a comprehensive triadic dataset of irredentism that the authors developed, consisting of irredentist states, host states, and potential ethnic groups to be redeemed.

Cederman, Rügger, and Schvitz (2022) systematically examine ethnic groups around the world in the post-World War Two period, geocoding ethnic settlements in order to connect them with national borders. Utilizing ‘aggregate groups’ rather than states, or minorities embedded within states, as the primary unit of analysis, the authors investigate how the interaction of ethnic groups and national borders influence the chance of civil conflict. They find that civil conflict is more likely when these aggregate groups are divided by national borders. However, irredentist claims made by leaders of a neighboring kin state (alone and in combination with secessionist claims) fundamentally mediate that relationship.

Hale and Siroky (2023) provide new micro-foundations for structural theories. Utilizing a computational model to analyze the impact of disaggregated regime types on irredentism, they argue that leaders attempt to respond to the rational preferences of citizens, who desire private goods, public goods, or transfers at the optimal tax rate. Their model suggests majoritarian democratic systems encourage the state to engage in irredentism to provide citizens public goods more efficiently. This incentive is much less pronounced in proportional systems. Utilizing the same theoretical framework, the model predicts military dictatorships will be more likely to encourage irredentism, whereas single-party dictatorships will be less likely to do so. This is because the selectorate for military dictatorships is considerably smaller than for single party dictatorships. It is also because bringing in ethnic kin has much lower probability of bringing in potential competitors to highly coveted positions in the winning coalition. These predictions are rigorously tested and empirically validated.

Collectively, research on irredentism points to the interplay of political institutions, economic inequalities and ethnic geography as crucial to understanding and explaining irredentism. Where political institutions (including political borders) engender ethnic differentiation and animosity regarding to the distribution of goods and services across ethnic groups, irredentism is more likely to erupt. This is particularly the case in majoritarian democracies and military dictatorships. Although infrequent, irredentism is one of the most costly kinds of armed conflict in the modern world, bringing together territorial claims and ethnic attachments, uniting interests and passions across political border in an explosive fusion.

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