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Interview – Ahsan Butt

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Ahsan I. Butt is an Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies at the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University. His main interests lie in nationalism, political violence, climate change, and South Asia. His first book, *Secession and Security: Explaining State Strategy Against Separatists*, was published by Cornell University Press in 2017 and won the 2019 International Studies Association award for best book in International Security Studies. His writing has appeared in journals such as *International Organization*, *Journal of Global Security Studies*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *Politics and Religion*, and *Security Studies*, as well as popular outlets such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, Al Jazeera, the *National Interest*, Foreign Policy, and the Diplomat. His research has received generous support from the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School, the Mellon Foundation, the Stanton Foundation, and the United States Institute of Peace. He is currently writing his second book, *The Lies That Bind Us: Nationalism and History Education*, which focuses on the construction of nationalism in schools and in history textbooks.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I think the most interesting debate right now as we speak—one which reflects a larger divide in the IR academic community—is the micro-debate concerning the origins of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I'm not an expert on that area of the world, but I have been observing closely the often times quite caustic debate between those who lay the blame at NATO expansion and those who lay the blame at Russian imperialism. As an onlooker it's been very interesting; it reflects a much larger discussion in the IR literature on why wars happen, as well as the conceivable measures that can be taken to avoid wars.

I might be biased, but I also think climate is a really important issue—I actually think in many ways it is *the* most important international political issue. To my surprise, however, there is much less attention paid to it than you might otherwise expect, especially if you compare it to the issue of nuclear weapons between the 1960s and the 1980s. I would argue climate is as important as—if not *more* important than—the issue of nuclear weapons during that period, so I find the relative lack of attention quite galling.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most important shifts in your thinking?

If I had to answer that question I would probably say something about the importance of class. I originally studied ethnic conflict in grad school and generally tended to view politics through an ethnic or nationalist lens. I would say I still mostly do, but the older I get, the more convinced I am by Marxist analyses of politics and the importance of class conflict. That may be due to real-world events and having lived as a young man through the 2008 recession and its aftermath. Just seeing the divide between the rich and the poor, especially in the U.S. but also in places like Pakistan, and seeing how far the rich will go to secure their own interests has definitely produced a shift in my thinking.

I was always broadly sympathetic to what we might call “Marxist-lite” views, but I would say that over the last 10-15 years I have developed a much greater sympathy for the classical Marxist views on how far the rich will go to attempt to protect their interests. Regarding *who* has had the most impact on that view, I don't think there's been any one

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person or text/document. Rather, I think it's been my lived experience over the past 10-15 years and just observing how economic elites behave. While I haven't had many massive shifts in my thinking, of the ones I have had, that's probably the biggest.

Your 2017 book *Secession and Security* provides a theoretical framework for understanding state responses to separatist movements. Could you give us an outline of the theory, and explain how it departs from other explanations for secessionist conflict?

Separatist conflict by definition is the product of at least two actors: the separatists themselves and the state they are taking on. I choose to focus on the latter because the state has greater room for manoeuvre and a wider array of actions it can take—both peaceful and violent. In many ways the creation of a new state requires the acquiescence of the host state, so the state becomes the central actor in these separatist disputes. My argument is that state responses to secessionist movements are conditioned by external security considerations, both in deciding *whether* to coerce separatists, as well as *how much* to coerce.

On deciding whether to coerce separatists, most states at most times opt to respond with a fight. My basic point is that secession by its very nature represents a pretty massive shift in the balance of power against the state, both with respect to the ethnic minority seeking independence, as well as existing geopolitical rivals. That shift in the balance of power is rendered quite unpalatable in a world in which the state fears future war against either the newly seceded minority or an existing geopolitical rival. It's only in situations where states don't fear a war against geopolitical rivals—in other words, they live in a good neighbourhood—and don't fear war against the seceding minority—in other words, relations between the minority and the host state are not especially grave—that they can opt for concessions, be it autonomy or outright independence. If a state fears future war, however, it cannot afford concessions, and will fight to hold onto the territory.

How hard a state fights is determined by another variable connected to external security: the amount of third-party support being received by the minority from geopolitical rivals. I disaggregate third-party support at three levels: limited, moderate, and extreme. For both materialist and emotional reasons, the higher the level of support from outside actors, the harder the state will coerce the secessionist minority. Materially, the more support that comes in, the stronger the movement will be; therefore, the harder a state must fight. Emotionally, a higher level of support corresponds with a greater sense of betrayal, and so we see these very angry decision-makers and security forces, who, in extremis, may be prepared even to commit genocide.

Prior to the publication of the book, most arguments on secessionist conflict focused largely on domestic factors. One very popular argument was the reputational/internal deterrence argument, which submits that states are reluctant to grant concessions to minority group A because they fear that minority group B, C, or D will rise up in the future and demand similar treatment. Other arguments look at domestic institutions, veto points, and the governing structures of states. But by and large, almost every argument I came across looked at factors internal to the state, whereas I looked at factors external to the state, specifically external security.

How does your framework supplement our understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

It's a very difficult and controversial topic, and even at the stage when I was writing the book, I was advised by a number of people that this may not be the best conflict to examine. I sort of ignored that, for better or worse. I tried to focus quite narrowly on the Israeli response to the First Intifada, and I try to be quite transparent about the fact that my theory has less explanatory power for the Second Intifada onwards, especially as we enter the 21st century.

The basic argument I make is that other arguments for separatist conflicts—such as the reputation argument I just laid out—would expect the Israeli state to concede to a Palestinian state relatively easily because there's no other ethnic minority within Israel that could conceivably ask for a state of their own. In other words, there's no one left to deter. Obviously, we didn't see that happen, and so the question then becomes, "why"? To answer that question I focus on the Palestinian secessionist moment—the First Intifada—and the Israeli response to it. What I argue is that Israel adopted a "policing strategy" that basically disallowed the creation of an independent state. The main reason it

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did so, at least in the early-to-mid '90s, was due to security concerns.

Israel's experience within its neighbourhood between independence and the '80s/'90s was typified by war, violence and threats, and so the first condition of fearing future war against existing geopolitical rivals was easily met. The second condition was also met, in that through an act of essentialism—some might say racism—the Israeli state and political elite subsumed Palestinian nationalism under a larger rubric of Arab identity. It therefore conceived of the Palestinians as a mortal enemy, given its relations with other Arab states and other Arab peoples in the preceding 50 years. Thus, my theory would predict that the Israeli state would not allow the creation of a Palestinian state, which is what we saw up to the Madrid and Oslo talks.

Moreover, the level of coercion Israel used during the First Intifada was largely commensurate with the lack of third-party support given to the Palestinians, which, by Israeli standards, was relatively muted. I certainly don't want to downplay the level of violence—there were many beatings and roughly 1,000 people died over five years—but given how Israel has behaved in other situations with the Palestinians, one can probably say that it used a lighter hand in this instance. My basic point is that, consistent with what my theory would predict—in a situation where a state fears future war, but where there is relatively limited third-party support—the state responded with coercion, but not *extreme* levels of coercion.

That said, I also try to be transparent in saying that my theory has much less explanatory power in the aftermath of the First Intifada, particularly with the rise of the religious nationalist settler lobby in Israel, which has inserted an ideological—and racist, frankly—angle to what might otherwise be a purely territorial conflict. I would therefore argue that Israeli intransigence on the question of a Palestinian state in the 21st century probably has less to do with external security concerns than hard-right Jewish nationalism. We see this reflected in the manifold increase of settlers in the Occupied Territories, from roughly tens of thousands, to more than half a million.

Are autonomy concessions effective in preventing demands for full independence?

There's an answer I can give based on my theory, and there's an answer I can give based on a more expansive view that goes beyond the narrow confines of the academic world. My theory says that if you give autonomy to minority groups, you're only going to increase the problem down the road. Autonomy grants political, economic, social, and even ideological resources to an ethnic or national minority, and while they may be satisfied today, it is likely that those same resources will be turned against the central state in the future in the form of stronger demands. I think that when it comes to secessionist moments where there are high levels of polarisation and politicisation of identity, it is reasonable to assert that this is how both the state and the separatist minority will see things.

That said, I don't want to issue a blanket statement against autonomy concessions. I'm a citizen of the world, and in certain cases, one could certainly argue that autonomy *does* buy off nationalists. The only thing I would say is that those agreements are more likely when they arise "naturally" out of democratic political processes—during elections, for instance. But if you're granting autonomy at the point of a gun, or with the threat of secession looming, then it is likely that those concessions will be logrolled into greater demands in the future. Because as I said, you're essentially giving political, economic, and social resources to the separatists.

What are the key recommendations policymakers should take from your book when trying to stave off destructive separatist conflicts?

There's a couple of suggestions I make in the book, although I try to emphasise that these recommendations exist largely in a make-believe world, because the conditions under which such strategies could be followed are quite narrow, if non-existent. For theory's sake, one thing the international community can/should do in such cases is restrain the geopolitical rivals of the state experiencing secession, because support for separatist groups by said rivals is generally what increases the temperature in these types of conflicts. Another recommendation would be to provide defensive guarantees for the state undergoing secession in exchange for "good" treatment of the minority. In other words, you attempt to address the central state's major security concerns.

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Obviously in the real world those recommendations are really hard to pull off. First of all, it's difficult to restrain the geopolitical rivals of the state undergoing secession because those same rivals will have a greater stake in that conflict than any non-aligned actor within the international community. When it comes to balance of resolve, the geopolitical rival will most likely have the advantage over any non-committed actor. The issue with providing defensive guarantees, on the other hand, is that they could be perceived as bending to some form of ransom demand in which the host state is holding a gun against the head of the minority group and saying, "pay me". The international community is likely to look at that with a great amount of scepticism. So while there are certain policy recommendations that come out of this book, in the real world, the very nature of separatism and secession makes it unlikely that these suggestions would ever be heeded.

In a 2019 article for Security Studies, you argue that the U.S. invasion of Iraq was motivated not by material factors, but by the desire to restore credibility and a reputation of strength following the 9/11 attacks. 20 years since the invasion, to what extent do reputational considerations continue to inform U.S. foreign policy?

I think big powers are always concerned with credibility, and a certain strand of ideologues are *deeply* concerned with credibility. Certainly, within the U.S., this is something we hear neoconservatives harp on about quite a lot. Reputation does matter, of course, but is probably no longer the primary contributor to American foreign or security policy in the same way it was in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. One of the central claims I make in the article is that there needs to be some sort of exogenous shock, such as a humiliating event, for a great power like the U.S. to want to re-establish a certain reputation of strength.

Nevertheless, there have been instances where reputation and credibility were given quite a bit of importance. For example, when President Obama failed to respond militarily to Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons against his own population—despite referring to it as a "red line"—there was certainly a lot of conversation about the issue of American credibility. The same could be said of the initial U.S. response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. And living in Washington D.C., one hears a lot of conversation about "if Iran does X we lose credibility...", or "if Russia does Y we lose credibility...". I think it sometimes provides an all-too-easy pretext for action when all other justifications fail, especially among a certain segment of the American intellectual elite. But by and large, reputational considerations feel much less important than they were 20 years ago.

Your argument also notes the support from both Democrats and Republicans for the initial decision to invade. Has the deepening of political polarisation within Washington in recent years produced any significant constraints on U.S. foreign policy?

I actually think it has. Normally we think of partisan polarisation as a "bad" thing—in many ways it *is* a bad thing, especially when the only two parties that "govern" can't stand one another—but I think one of its positive unintended consequences is that it prevents executives from haphazardly launching costly wars. In many ways political polarisation functions as a check on the type of unbridled support where everybody gets behind the "national interest" and follows the executive's lead. I don't think executives from either party today would be able to launch an Iraq-style conflict without the full support of the other party—I just don't think it's realistic. I would say that's to the benefit of the rest of the world.

Could you tell us a bit about your current book project?

Yes, absolutely. I'm looking at three different parts of the world: North America, South America, and South Asia, where I examine how history textbooks, and history education more generally, are used by governments to build senses of nationalism and national identity. I disaggregate national identity into three categories: boundaries of membership, boundaries of time, and boundaries of space.

To examine boundaries of membership—who is in the in-group and who is in the out-group—I use U.S. history textbooks and their stories of race relations as a crutch to understand how these boundaries are constructed. When it comes to boundaries of time, I look at South Asia, particularly India and Pakistan, and the ways in which certain eras

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are periodised, as well as how certain dates are remembered. What we observe is that both countries have religious nationalist movements which put forward very particular versions of history. I consider, for instance, the BJP's memory of the Mughal Empire, or its view of how independence in 1947 ought to be remembered—especially Nehru and Gandhi's role—or even how it answers questions connected to Gandhi's assassination.

And then when it comes to boundaries of space, I look at how Argentina and Chile have peacefully handled territorial disputes—such as the Beagle Channel Crisis of the late 1970s or the historic dispute over Patagonia—which in other contexts could have easily escalated into full-blown war. I focus on how textbooks tell stories of these territories in contrast to more hotly contested territories elsewhere in the world, such as Kashmir in the case of South Asia. So far I've done a bunch of interviews using local language skills in each region, and I am quite excited about it.

What is the most important piece of advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

The perfect world is one in which you find a question that marries: (1) an issue of real-world importance; (2) something that *you* as a citizen of the world care about; with (3) a theoretical/empirical gap in the literature. If you can find a question that aligns those three things, then there's nothing quite like it, because it ensures that you will always have a passion for it, that there will always be an audience for your work, and that there will be opportunities outside of academia to make a name for yourself and have a real effect on the real world. So if you can find that particular unicorn, hold onto it.