

Freedom Fighters

From Kosovo to Kurdistan, rebels vie for independence. Here are the reasons some succeed—and some don't

By JOHANNA MC GEARY

AN INDEPENDENT KOSOVO? WELL, WHY NOT? For that matter, why not independent Kurdistan? Or Chechnya or East Timor or Quebec? Once you start tinkering with global cartography, everyone wants his say. The unintended consequences of malleable borders scare away all but the most arrogant of statesmen. Yet Secretary of State Madeleine Albright sounded ready to try it last week: "Great nations who understand the importance of sovereignty at various times cede various portions of it in order to achieve some better good for their country."

History is no guide. Nations are not some natural, organic phenomenon but complex accumulations of strength, alliances and enmities. And the passion for nationhood has swung between eras of consolidation and fragmentation: the single-state world of the Roman Empire; the 500-odd nations of the 1500s Renaissance. In the post-cold war age, people impatient with the map they've inherited appear to be caught in between. A globalized economy is melting down the relevance of nationhood at the same time that the dispossessed's unrealized yearnings to be a state are gaining legitimacy.

It is an axiom of statehood that war is what dictates borders; winners get the right to draw new lines. After World War I, as the Great Powers meted out geographical punishments and rewards, Woodrow Wilson advocated two principles that have governed statemaking ever since: the right to self-determination and the right to inviolable national borders. Unfortunately, these principles are often in conflict.

For most of the century, the notion that borders were sacred prevailed. African and Asian decolonization in the 1960s recognized states along borders set by colonial rulers. It wasn't quite as thoughtless as critics of these "arbitrary" lines that split ethnic groups and ancient kingdoms now charge. At least some diplomats believed that multiethnic states—like the U.S.—should be encouraged. Between 1945 and 1990, secession and separatism were not just discouraged but were also forcibly opposed. The sole success: Bangladesh in 1971.

The end of communism thrust the principle of self-determination back into prominence, and new states proliferated. In the thrill of cold war victory, the West let captive nations in Eastern Europe grab back their independence and happily

pushed statehood for the 14 republics inside the Soviet Union that wanted out. In consequence, independence and separatist movements weaving together ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and economic self-interests have blossomed worldwide.

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—Brent Scowcroft,
former National Security Adviser

As Robert Lansing, Wilson's Secretary of State, warned, self-determination "is bound to be the basis for impossible demands and create trouble in many lands. What a calamity that the phrase was ever uttered." Where does the noble concept of self-determination stop?

In expedience. Purists may yearn for a single principle to apply across the board. But, says Brent Scowcroft, George Bush's National Security Adviser, "consistency here doesn't work." Pragmatism is what rules the world of power politics, in which a range of less high-minded considerations determines who wins and who loses in the statehood lottery.

■ **LUCK** The bad luck of historical accident is what has left most current claimants out in the cold. To change that, you need to be in the right movement at the right time in the right place. The Kurds in northern Iraq were just another bunch of bickering agitators until the U.S. needed them to challenge Saddam Hussein. No one cared a whit for the Kosovars until Slobodan Milosevic ground them into the dirt. (It obviously helps to be the victim of a reviled dictator.) But Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka: Your moment has yet to arrive.

■ **LOCATION** Distance from Washington is relevant but cuts both ways. Fighting in Europe's backyard helps the Kosovars but hurts the Kurds. Living far from the West deprives oppressed East Timor of foreign support, but in Sri Lanka the secessionist Tamil Tigers wage their war without interference.

■ **TELEVISION** It is not necessarily the legitimacy of a group's claim as much as the telegenic horror of its suffering that gains the combination of sympathy and anxiety crucial to independence. Constant images of the *intifadeh* helped transform the Palestinians from terrorist outcasts to deserving victims. The Basques, seeking a homeland from Spain and France, can air no bloody incidents to galvanize world support.

■ **GOOD GUYS VS. BAD GUYS** You have to be seen as the good guys in your struggle. This is not a guarantee: the Ibos in Biafra were regarded as victims, yet the world refused them statehood. Still, it is because of the Chechens' reputation for thuggery that they command little support. Leaders can make or break perceptions: Abdullah Ocalan as a terrorist cast the Kurds into disrepute; captive and martyred, he may help reshape them into the cause du jour. The alchemy of time also helps, transmuted bad rebels into negotiating partners, as with Northern Ireland's Roman Catholics.

■ **UNITY** You can have too much or too little. The Kurds have long been thwarted by their internal rivalries. The Kosovars are feared because they might unite with ethnic brothers in Albania and Macedonia. Physical dispersal is an even greater obstacle: How would you separate territorially Rwanda's intermingled Hutu and Tutsi?

■ **DEMOCRACY** The victors of the cold war will judge your case, and they are disposed to anoint

only noncommunist, nonauthoritarian believers in multiparty elections and the free market. That pretty much negates the prospects of religious-based Chechnya and most African separatists. The Kosovars' lack of civil institutions and political structures makes them a premature candidate.

■ **POTENTIAL TO ROCK THE GLOBAL BOAT** Stability, more than any other principle, governs statemakers. One reason the Kurds may never get their state is that they covet pieces of four geostrategically important nations: Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Tibet is stuck as long as the world considers it folly to take on China.

■ **VICTORY** War is still the best guarantee of independence—if you win. Eritrea won in 1993, after 32 years of battle. The Kosovars and the Kurds are not ready to concede.

Quite frankly, most of today's aspirants for independence are not going to get it now, and maybe never will. The Helsinki accords of 1975 approved changes of borders only by mutual consent. Yet who besides the Czech Republic and Slovakia will politely shake hands and part ways?

That is why statesmen invented autonomy. It looks like a nice middle ground between immovable borders and the chaos of universal self-determination. "We have to work out these ways of allowing groups of people who feel they have something important in common to have a degree of autonomy within the existing borders," prescribes Samuel P. Huntington, a Harvard professor who has written on the subject. But how does the world accomplish that? And maybe it shouldn't. Existing arrangements of semipartition, like in Cyprus and Bosnia, are also semiprotectorates requiring long-term peacekeeping troops.

In the march of history, borders change, states come and go. How the West settles Kosovo is going to set precedents for how our era manages that, like 'em or not. ■

Questions

1. What factors determine which groups do and do not achieve independence?
2. What does the writer mean when she states that "the end of communism thrust the principle of self-determination back into prominence"?



Who Gets To Be a State?

What determines whether groups of people succeed in establishing independent nations? As Johanna McGeary notes in “Freedom Fighters” on page 17, the answer to that question depends on the complex power politics of a given period in history. In our own era, people around the globe are seeking self-determination and political independence within existing states for a variety of reasons, using both peaceful and violent means. Complete the chart below to learn more about the conflict between Kosovar Albanians and Yugoslavian Serbs, and compare this dispute to another statehood movement.

Look into the situation in Kosovo, then select another area to research from the following list. An excellent source is the

Washington Post’s “World Special Reports” website at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/special.htm>.

Once you arrive at the site, click on the website headings in parentheses below for the independence movement you selected:

- Kosovo (The Balkans)
- The Palestinians (The Middle East)
- Quebec (Canada report)
- East Timor (Indonesia report)
- The Kurds (Ocalan report)
- Nagorno-Karabakh (Post-Soviet era)

For Discussion As a class, put your findings together in a large chart on the board or across a wall of the classroom. Look over the cases and evaluate:

1. Which movement has involved the most violence? The least?

state n. a) the power or authority represented by a body of people politically organized under one government, especially an independent government, within a territory or territories having definite boundaries; b) such a body of people; body politic.

What accounts for the difference?

2. Which movement is most likely to achieve its goal? Which is least? What are the notable differences between these two cases?

3. To which movements are you most and least sympathetic? Why? Are all movements for self-determination equally valid? What principles would you like to see applied as the United Nations, the United States, NATO and others take positions on questions of statehood around the world?

STATEHOOD MOVEMENTS

	KOSOVO	
Current political status of region		
Part of what state or states in the past?		
Reasons for demanding statehood		
Methods used to achieve statehood		
Goal supported by the West?		
Barriers to statehood		
Predict: likelihood of becoming an independent state in the next five years		