

# Mafias and governments

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In the last episode we saw that mafias are just microgovernments: both use force and social services to maintain power. I discussed how small mafias must use violence to maintain the perception of legitimacy. Here, I'll begin with the perkier side of efficient provision of social services.

**Being nice guys** Everybody wants to think they're nice people. This counts for heads of state too, who want to be able to tell their kids that they're helping to make the world a safer and more pleasant place to live. Every mafia has its narrative of services provided, including protection from the mafia next door for those who have paid-up taxes, the list of Hamas's social services, and the U.S.'s Social Security system. The cynical can take this as PR to make sure that the subjects don't revolt, while the optimistic can take it as a true attempt to help people. Both are likely right to some extent.

**Big government versus small** As a broad rule, small organizations are more adaptable and responsive and have fewer layers of bureaucracy between the idea and the final implementation of the service. This is broadly true whether we're comparing big and small governments, mafias, or corporations.

So say we had a small mafia, like Hamas, providing services comparable to those provided by the existing Palestinian government, headed by the well-entrenched Fatah party. Hamas could do more with less, and it is an easily-explained surprise that they won the election: you've got two competing governments, one of which is an entrenched bureaucracy inefficiently providing social services, and one of which is a small, relatively nimble organization doing better at providing the same services.

**Families as government** The most basic form of government is the family. The family does provide the sort of services that one would expect from a government or even a market, like economic insurance and loans of capital. That stereotypical giant Catholic family is a credit collective. [Massey et al., 2002, p 12] And the decline of the traditional family in the U.S. (as endlessly lamented by social conservatives) is due to the increasing ability of the open market to provide for the individual's needs (as endlessly celebrated by economic conservatives).

The rhetoric of the close-knit family sticking together is all very appealing, but in many cases throughout the world, the outcome has been violent and decidedly unwholesome, as big families (aka clans, tribes) and small governments sometimes are one and the same. African clans often go to war with each other, the Italian mafia is primarily a coalition of families, and Saddam Hussein's government was to a large extent his clan—recall how his brother was high on the U.S.'s hit list.

**The goals of government** Microgovernments often have a defined goal, which may or may not look evil to the rest of us. They could be seeking to overthrow the Nazi invaders, overthrow the U.S. invaders, make sure that a neighborhood that is ill-protected by the larger government gets its share, control the drug trade, or dissolve Israel.

Expansion also seems to be a fave goal for just about every government.

But as a government gets bigger and better established, its goals become much more diffuse. If the U.S. government has a set of distinct goals, I certainly can't guess what they are.

And, of course, we must not forget that the goal for the members of governments of all sizes is to grab stuff for the people in power and their pals.

**The two are not equally comparable** People spend much time on defining these microgovernments, especially regarding the Middle East. Are they a mafia, a coalition of happy families, a legitimate government, a terrorist organization? Such a debate is a waste of time, because once we decide that Hamas is both a social service organization or a terrorist organization, we still have no idea whether this sums up to legitimacy or virtuousness. I'm perfectly fine with naming the world's service-providing, gun-toting mafias as governments, but that clearly does not imply legitimacy or an ethical justification for their actions.

Every government of all sizes maintains its power via both the threat of violence; and social services, virtuous deeds, and a story about why the founders are the rightful leaders (Divine right, blood ties, democratic will, or whatever).

So our first question in evaluating legitimacy is to evaluate the balance between violence and service. Even though the small governments are more efficient on the service end, they are almost always so far along on the violence side to make the edge in efficiency look trivial.

The other question is about the goals. Are the stated goals of those governments with stated goals destructive? Are the goals of expansion for the sake of expansion and the grabbiness of those in power in check?

Making such a judgment is hard. If you've read anything by me in the past, then you know how I personally score Hamas and Hezbollah, but how am I to convince you that their violence outweighs their social services? It's comparing meters to minutes. You decide for yourself, but do it without labels—to say that 'they provide services and organize a militia, therefore they are a government, therefore they are legitimate' is to put too much weight on the legitimacy of all governments. Sure, on some level it's all just a bunch of comparable teams vying

for turf, but some of those teams are much more destructive and some are much more constructive. Crips, Bloods, and the LA police all have some community support and some community animosity, but I'm comfortable rooting for the LA police in that one [and that's even after the LA police fined me \$271 for running a red light on my bicycle].

**Abhorrent vacuums** Given that a government maintains its status via the threat of force, it seems immoral. That's the libertarian reasoning, which sort of stops there. But there are few situations anywhere where there *isn't* some type of government in place.

Where does one not find governments? In the U.S.A., government has explicitly stepped out of managing the drug trade. But, wonder of wonders, small mafias have taken over in that field and make sure that things are run in an orderly manner.

In Iraq, the government was quickly dismantled, but it is not the case that there is no government there either. Instead, a large number of small mafias are in a civil war to control at least their own little space, if not the whole country.

When there isn't a government in the recognized sense of the term, somebody will start one up, and the odds are darn good that whoever is running the thing is doing it out of personal self interest, that the microgovernment maintains status via regular demonstrations of violence, and if it maintains its power and expands enough for us to notice then it is likely providing popular services and telling a locally popular story about its inception.

I made up the word microgovernment for this essay [again, I haven't scoured the Pol Sci literature, so I'm not claiming originality; but see Heald [1986] for an anecdotal account of the formation of mafias in Africa.] because all the other words for such a thing have a tinge of violence and even evil: the gang, the mafia, the warlord's faction, the militia, and maybe we can even throw in the cult.

What happened in Iraq was no surprise to anybody except the Bush administration: when you eliminate a government which is blandly evil, a large, virtuous government doesn't magically spring up in place. It's much easier for small factions to form around the local charismatic figure, via a combination of violence and good storytelling, with a heavy lean toward the violence side. The blandly evil government is not the stopper on the bottle that one would ideally wish for, but if it is there, replacing it with another is risky. Sure, it would be great if we could eliminate drugs by just refusing to accept them in the law, and we could replace Hussein's government with a parliamentary democracy. But when there is no large, boring government overseeing a territory, then small, almost certainly violent governments come in to fill the space.

## References

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