Whither the Nation-State?

For the better part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the concept of the nation-state (a state composed of one ethnicity) has stood at the forefront of thought about the world structure and has been inscribed as the foundation of today's international system of law and order. Yet, over the the past few years, incidents around the world have levied an assault on the doctrine of the ethnic state. Under the pressures of the post-Cold War international system, states are simultaneously being torn apart from within and made obsolete from without.

By Stephanie Marrone

Today, after decades of predominance in the international system, notions of state sovereignty and the role of the nation-state are in flux. On one hand, minorities within multi-ethnic states have raised their voices in the name of nationalism, calling for their own state and challenging accepted borders and state structures. In the process, they have spawned non-state actors in the international arena—like the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the South West African People's Organization (SWAPO) prior to Namibian independence—certain of which have received official recognition and observer status in the United Nations. On the other hand, multi-national organizations and associations, many of which arose in the post-World War II period, have offered a vision of global interdependence that has taken responsibilities out of state hands.

With the end of the Cold War, the boundaries of states have once again come into question. Examples abound of countries, racked by centrifugal forces, dissolving into smaller units of ethnic affiliations: the current Balkan crisis, the breakup of the former Soviet Union, inter-ethnic and tribal violence in various parts of Africa (most notably Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, South Africa and Liberia), the Kurdish struggle against Iraq and Turkey, Tamil opposition in Sri Lanka, and Canada's struggle with secessionist groups.

The violence of the break-up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia has cast serious doubts on the credibility and desirability of a state composed of one ethnicity. If war and "ethnic

The United Nations, New York: making nation-states obsolete from without? [Maurice George]

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cleansing" are to be the ideology and practice at the root of the nation-state, many argue that such a state should not exist. Rather than create states for each nation, new thinking asserts that peoples and states must learn to live in multi-ethnic communities and respect the rights of minority groups within their boundaries. Nevertheless, the ideology of the nation-state has remained strong.

In response to the crisis of state sovereignty inherent in these nationalist groups—and in an attempt to shore up the existing international state system—the Council of Europe issued a first-time declaration on October 9, 1993 that sought to promote the rights and protection of national minorities. Yet, ambivalence on the part of the European leaders resulted in the Council's failure to reach any final agreement on the definition of a "national minority," the specific rights of such groups or whether legislation aimed at their protection should be binding on member states. Czech President Vaclav Havel warned against affording too much protection for minorities: "It inevitably leads to questioning of the integrity of the individual states and the inviolability of their present borders and thus even the validity of all postwar peace treaties." To codify group rights to self-determination would place the sovereignty of states in jeopardy—the very opposite of what the European negotiators had in mind.

At the same time, the existence of supra-national organizations and confederations that cut across state boundaries can be observed in the international system. They have grown increasingly powerful in directing international relations and the affairs of sovereign states. The United States became painfully aware of this when numbers of their soldiers were killed in Somalia under the direction of a United Nations (UN) command led by Turkish generals.

Such organizations as the UN (along with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF)), the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), the European Community
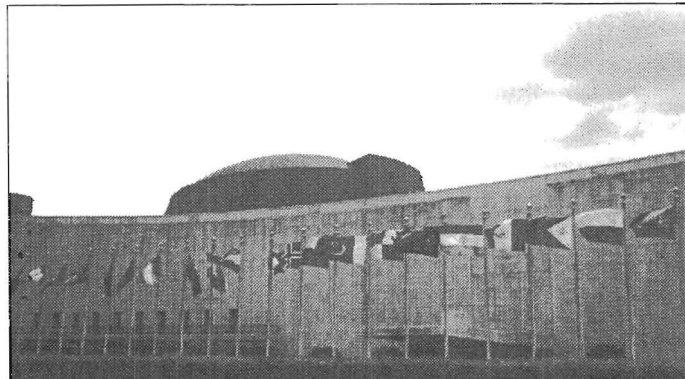
(EC) and regional political and military unions of states such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Organization of American States (OAS), the Western European Union (WEU), NATO, and the proposed NAFTA have gained importance in resolving conflicts both between and within faltering nation-states. Global problems, such as the AIDS epidemic and the environment, require global solutions and will continue to demand that individual states work together.

Moreover, revolutions in technology and communication have widened the range of influential actors in the international arena. The nineteenth century model of a self-contained state which could ensure economic growth and justice within its given territory no longer holds true. The new model is one of sub-national entities that are linked together into larger economic units. Local government officials in the United States compete with each other for the business of Mitsubishi or Motorola. Multi-national corporations are increasingly challenging the sanctity of borders. As the "charge" towards globalization continues, what is the future of the nation-state?

Nations, States, and Nation-States

In everyday usage, the terms nation, state and nation-state are often employed interchangeably. However, it is important to point out how they differ. A state is most often described as a political or legal entity which operates in the international arena under the United Nations and has the power to require obedience and loyalty from its citizens. International law, enshrined in the charter of the United Nations, governs relations between states.

Nations are more difficult to define conclusively. There are any number of very different standards by which a non-state nation may define itself or be defined—language, ethnicity, race, shared culture, historical precedent—and a key component of any nation is the consciousness of being one. Although there are approximately 170 independent states in the world, there are as many as 8,000 nations if language is used as the defining factor. Since by far the majority of these nations are without their own states, they are unrepresented in international law. For instance, the Navajo nation in America does not have its own place at the United Nations.

Hugh Seton-Watson, in his book *Nations and States*, offers a succinct definition: "All I can find to say is that a nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation or behave as if they formed one." Benedict Anderson enhances this definition by adding an anthropological dimension: "[a nation] is an *imagined* political community... It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them; yet in the minds of each lives the image of the communion...."

In theory, a nation-state combines the two concepts of nation and state to describe a political entity with representation in the international community, consisting of a "people" who share aspects of the same culture, language, ethnicity or history. Central to the concept of the nation-state is the notion that a

> ## "It is the state which makes the nation and not the nation the state."
> ### Colonal Pilsudski, liberator of Poland

> ## "We have made Italy. Now we have to make Italians."
> ### Massimo d'Azeglio, 1860

government of a state ought to serve entities called nations.

While nation-states sit at the foundation of the contemporary structure of international law, only a handful of states contain representatives of a single nation. With thousands of cultures, languages, and, therefore, nations in the world—many of whom overlap and intermingle geographically—the formation of true "nation-states" often requires mass migrations or the sort of 'ethnic cleansing' that is currently sweeping Bosnia and that the Nazi regime brought upon Germany and its neighbors during the Second World War.

States today are usually comprised of one (or more) primary nations and any number of smaller minority nations within. Even in Western Europe—which most historians see as the birthplace of concepts of the nation-state and nationalism (the movement to become a nation-state)—there are few full-fledged nation-states. And most of these came about through the interplay of power politics, not the fulfillment of nationalist dreams. The borders of so-called nation-states outside of Europe tend to be multi-national mixtures whose boundaries were created and divided by victorious imperialists for economic or strategic purposes.

When Did Nationalism Originate?

Ancient peoples, from the Greeks and Romans to the Germans and Jews, felt a loyalty to their respective principalities and tribes (enough to ward off invaders and to conquer foreign territories) and an affection for the customs, physical surroundings and people among whom they were born or raised. But, do these feelings of attachment constitute nationalism or consciousness of a "nation"?

Analysts are divided over the origins of nationalism. Some scholars trace it back to instinctive behavior and the earliest societies. They see nations and ethnic communities as steadfast units of history and integral elements of human experience. Nations are natural and therefore unlikely to disappear.

Other academics see nationalism as the product of particular economic and social circumstances. Nations are neither natural nor necessary, but are a product of modern phenomena such as capitalism, bureaucracy, and the industrial revolution. In this view, the birth of nations can be dated to the late 18th century.

A pioneering scholar of nationalism, Anthony Smith, attempts in his book *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, to seek an intermediate point between these perspectives. He emphasizes that although nationalism is a wholly modern phenomenon, the modern nation incorporates several features of pre-modern ethnic communities. "Modern nations simply extend, deepen and streamline ways in which members of [ethnic groups] associated and communicated. They do not introduce startlingly novel elements, or change the goals of human association and communication."

Setting the Stage for Modern Nationalism: The Seventeenth Century

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, states in Europe tended to be multinational conglomerations. They existed to

serve God and to support dynasties (not 'the people' or specific communities). The monarch himself personified the state—Louis XIV of France would say *L'etat c'est moi*—and the culture and language of his people were irrelevant to his mandate from above. Different communities and "nations" were united into states by conquest and inter-court maneuvering (alliances based on marriages between members of different monarchies).

The Peace of Westphalia in 1648—which effectively ended years of religious wars involving England, France, the Netherlands and the Holy Roman Empire—introduced the beginnings of the "modern" state. Such a state included a more centralized political structure and new notions of sovereignty: the state was now understood to possess a monopoly over the administration of justice and the use of force within its territorial boundaries. The peace settlement also marked the advent in international law of the modern European system of sovereign states, the system against which most nationalists formed their rival vision of the world.

The social structure of the seventeenth century was segmented into many different sub-cultures and classes which inhibited the advancement of the nation-state. Peasants, squires, burgesses and aristocrats were the distinctive groups within such societies. Each had its own interests, customs and traditions. While these different classes may have hailed from the same ethnicity, their sense of shared community was very different one from the other. The celebrated French historian Alexis de Tocqueville observed that this period was "when the provinces and towns formed so many different nations in the midst of their common country." In Russia, for example, the court nobility spoke French among themselves and had a difficult time understanding the colloquial Russian of the peasantry.

In the old kingdoms, all the functions that we today expect the state to carry out were usually provided by local government. Feudal agricultural estates and towns were the units of production and trade, while nobles and local parliaments made law and administered town affairs. The dynasts' role was to govern relations between these local institutions and communities. In these diverse pockets, political loyalty and sense of shared community went to town, province, guild, or religious body, not state or nation. At the court level, kings surrounded themselves with their own group of loyal servants who were often of foreign descent. One observes Italians serving as diplomats to French and English Kings, as well as Germanic princes on Spanish

Prussia's Prince Otto von Bismarck (1815-98): unification of Germany from above.

thrones.

Since customs and institutions cut across ethnic lines, the foundations of group loyalty were mainly religious and dynastic, not national. However, during the period of monarchical dominance, the concepts of the nation and nation-state were evolving. Parliaments were appearing and, with them, the attendant belief that they should represent the great collective interests of the people, rather than of the monarch. The infrastructure created by the monarchies—centralized state governments with law, courts, roads, canals and officials—were the foundations on which the later nations developed. And as the old structures which held ethnicity in abeyance disappeared, the way to the nation-state became cleared.

The 18th Century: Intellectuals Debate Nationalism and the Nation-State

From the perspective of intellectual thought, the years preceding the French Revolution of 1789 are commonly labelled the Age of Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was inspired by a revolution in scientific and intellectual thought. It was characterized by a belief in the powers of human reason, science and progress. The notion of the state during this time evolved from one defined as an estate owned by a ruler and sanctified by divine right, to one that belonged to an abstract and impersonal authority—the people—and which was governed by public officers, of whom the king was the highest. This fundamental shift, that set the conditions for the rise of the nation-state, arose from the intersection of the new forces of rationalism, capitalism and the Napoleonic Empire.

One of the ideas that rationalists such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke developed was the criticism of divine right monarchy. Gone was the pageantry and pretense of heavenly mandate. Instead, rulers and ruled were to be bound by a rationalized contract. An enlightened despot should not claim a mandate from God, they argued. Justification for authority was grounded in usefulness to the state and society. The monarch was to be considered the "first servant of the state." This attack on divine right monarchy extended to a criticism of the whole social structure of privilege and feudal caste ranking.

The developing force of industrial capitalism also contributed to the coming of nation-states. The pre-conditions of industrial operations involved a steady labor source, supply of raw materials and a market. Changes in agricultural
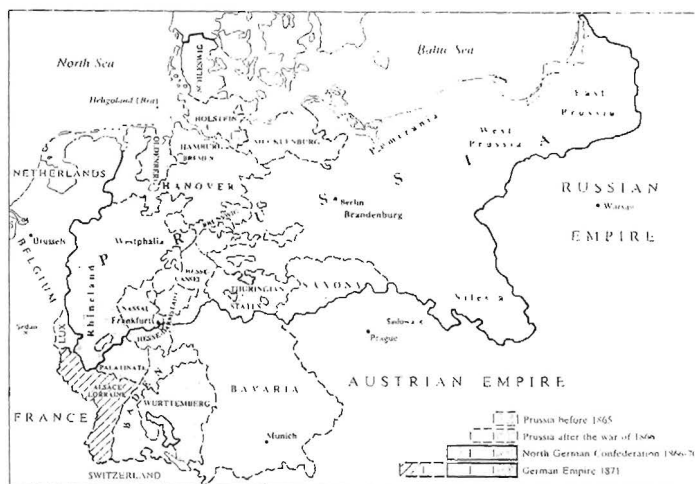
German unification (1866-71): not all Germanic peoples were included. [Robert Gildea, Barricades and Borders, OUP, 1991, p. 199]

production—new crops introduced from the colonies, new techniques of cultivation, crop rotation, and new implements—resulted in the breakdown of feudal relations and produced a vast population now increasingly tied to the market for their livelihood. Early economists such as Adam Smith expounded the idea of laissez-faire economics or free-trade. In *The Wealth of Nations*, he advocated the natural working of the "invisible hand" in guiding trade and the establishment of prices. A capitalist, market economy required that people be free to move. Thus, the peasant became a paid worker, without tie to land. Social status built on rank began to erode in favor of one based on wealth. Thus, there grew up people without ties to noble privilege, people who could then associate with nations.

At its height, the Napoleonic empire (1804-1815) encompassed the entire European mainland except the Balkan peninsula. Many historians argue that nationalism, and the desire to endow nations with state powers, developed in resistance to the conquest and domination of Napoleonic power. (Although, other scholars also assert that opposition movements had less to do with nationalism and more to do with the desire to oust the French conquerors.) Protests began in Germany and Italy and spread eastward in the wake of Napoleon's conquests. Local populations resented foreign domination and protested against the dictation of French policy. As one of the emerging "isms" of the nineteenth century (along with liberalism, radicalism, socialism, individualism, etc.) nationalism moved throughout Central, Eastern and Western Europe, taking on a slightly different, local flavor in each new locale.

The Consolidation of the Nation-State: Ideas Meet Power

The nineteenth century saw the acceptance of nationalism as a central and indispensible component to the modern European state. Yet, it was also a period that saw many complications in the formation of nation-states. Overall, nationalist movements were led by intellectuals. They instilled the idea of a cultural nationalism, emphasizing that each people had a language, history, worldview, and culture of its own. It was important for each nation to create for itself a sovereign state to preserve these national differences and to ensure liberty and justice for its members.

However, the course of the first half of the nineteenth century demonstrated to nationalists throughout Europe that a nationalist ideology was itself not enough to build a nation-state. The revolutions that took place in 1848 reflect these problems. Throughout Central and Eastern Europe, from the Italian peninsula and the Germanic states to the Austrian Habsburg monarchy, nationalist uprisings appeared. But, nowhere did these uprisings succeed in the creation of nation-states. The power of the multinational, dynastic states stood staunchly

in the way.

Furthermore, in the German case, the question of where to place the boundaries of a new German state could not be answered. Centuries of German migration had left Germanic peoples scattered throughout Central and Eastern Europe. The Austrian Habsburg monarchy, with their vast territories of non-Germans—saw no reason to join a German confederation. Yet, could a unified Germany truly be a nation-state, nationalists questioned, if the Austrians were not involved? In 1848, German unification foundered on this and other issues.

At the same time, the chauvinistic nature of certain types of nationalism eventually prevented the realization of nation-states. In the case of the Habsburg monarchy, the different nationalities, rather than uniting against the common enemy of Austrian hegemony, tended to fight amongst each other. In a celebrated case, Vienna agreed to the formation of a representative parliament for the Magyars in Hungary. However, in order to vote for that parliament, individuals were required to speak Hungarian. The other nationalities living on Hungarian lands were angered by such a requirement and saw little difference from the rule of the Austrians. Under these circumstances, when forces came through to suppress a Hungarian uprising, many of the other nationalities stood against the Hungarians and with the Habsburgs.

The events of 1848 further reflected two different types of nationalism that have been present in European history since. One one hand, there was the drive towards national unification, the bringing together of a "nation": in Italy and Germany for example. On the other hand, one sees the fragmentation or breaking up of multinational states into their "national" parts: Eastern Europe and the Balkans, for instance.

Years later, when Germany (1866-1871) and Italy (1859-1870) did undergo unification, the process was driven less by the nationalist intellectuals and more by the very calculated power politics of conservative leaders who used war and diplomacy, not some inherent national bond between peoples, as the foundation of the new "nation-states". These leaders—Prince Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898) in Prussia and Count Camillo di Cavour (1810-1861) in Piedmont/Italy—did not always act out of the desire for a nation-state. Rather, they were in search of a state structure that would be able to compete economically and militarily with industrialized Great Britain and industrializing France. Moreover, the creation of the nation-state, these leaders believed, would provide a safety-valve that would suppress class antagonisms under the framework of nationalism—a safety-valve that would allow them to perpetuate their conservative rule.

From the outset, the new Italian and German states were met with problems. In a celebrated statement following unification—which belied the nationalist intellectual assumption

EUROPE AFTER 1919

LEGEND

Territories lost by Russia

New nations created from Austro-Hungary

Territories lost by Germany

Former boundaries of Austro-Hungary

Post-World War I Europe: "nation-states" and "oppressed minorities". [Electromap, Inc.]

that there existed a natural tie among the people of the Italian peninsula—Massimo d'Azeglio, former Prime Minister of the Italian state of Piedmont, said: "We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians." At the same time, in Germany, the exclusion of Austria, the many ethnic Germans who remained outside German borders and the extensive sovereignty given to many component states of the new Germany (until World War I Bavaria maintained a foreign ambassador and embassy in Berlin) left many Germans frustrated with the process of unification and with the feeling that the creation of a German nation-state had not yet been completed.

Building the "Nation"-State

Other historians of national consciousness have argued that nationalism was produced by the rapid economic and social changes attendant with the nineteenth century. Often peoples and communities that existed within the confines of what was considered a nation, held only a regional consciousness. Their daily interactions took place within the boundaries of their particular region, they spoke regional languages and subscribed to regional history. They had no reason to consider the remainder of the country. In France, for example, historian Eugen Weber points out that the "French" spoke a mosaic of regional dialects. Somewhere between a quarter and a half of the population spoke no French at all in 1863.

With the expansion of transportation networks and the growth of national (and international) markets, individuals suddenly found reason to take part in a larger national unit. In Western Europe, and France in particular, regional groups began to learn the language of the center (without which they could do no business) and often did so by sending their children to the newly appearing national schools. At these schools, the children learned about national rather than regional history. In the course of little more than a generation, formerly isolated regions had, due to economic incentive, integrated themselves both physically and culturally into a national whole.

Increasingly, federal governments controlled and penetrated the lives of their people. They imposed taxes, controlled information, established schools and transportation networks, and offered social security and protection from foreign threats. Most importantly, the new states created national armies that brought together citizens from all over the country and filled them with a sense of discipline and love for the "*patrie*". In *Faces of Nationalism*, Boyd Schafer argues that "people increasingly participated in the national affairs and identified themselves and their political and cultural interests with those of their respective nations..." The activities of governments became so pervasive that few could avoid the call to nationalism and the appreciation that their country provided them with welfare and security.

Many scholars now argue that nationalism is not a force inherent to Europe but one that was "invented", often purposely, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Participation in national affairs further increased through voting,

U.S. President Woodrow Wilson (1913-21): staunch supporter of self-determination.

mass ceremonies, and national celebrations. National holidays were created to celebrate the new nation-states and to foster (create) a new historical memory. At the same time, statues to local heroes were replaced by those of national heroes in an effort to foster unity and a sense of collective consciousness. Each of these engendered a feeling of pride and attachment for their own country. These feelings were buttressed by the rebirth of the Olympics and other forms of international athletic competition. By cheering a nation, one placed oneself in opposition to all other nations. A bond was created between all those who cheered for the same side.

This creation of nationalism, historians claim, changed the nature of the national ethos from a "liberal" variety to a "chauvinistic" variety. The former believed in the importance of a nation-state for all nations and did not consider any one nation to be superior to any other. In contrast, the latter asserted the ideology of a "chosen people" who are inherently different and better than those around them. This form of nationalism often led to a single-minded implementation of one nationalities' goals at the expense, or the negation, of other nations' claims to a nation-state.

Nationalism in the Twentieth Century

World War I brought the concept of the nation-state to its apex. On June 25, 1914, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and his wife, Sophie, were assassinated in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo. The multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire assumed that the assassins were operating with Serbian support. The determination to crush the Serbian separatism was one factor that led to its declaration of war on Serbia one month later and the following outbreak of World War I.

At the peace settlements of Versailles (1918), American President Woodrow Wilson made the principle of national self-determination the basis of his plan for a new international order. "Self-determination," he claimed, "is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril." The treaty attempted to actualize the principle of coinciding state frontiers with those of ethnicity and language.

But a combination of factors prevented the realization of the nation-state plan. Despite Wilson's efforts, the victorious allies were more interested in permanently reducing German power than they were in following the ideals of nationalism. Germany was split up into zones of occupation and German lands—with German people—were given to some of the new "nation-states"—Poland and Czechoslovakia, for example.

At the same time, Europe simply contained too many overlapping ethnic groups to reach this goal. For example, the new states created from the broken Austro-Hungarian empire were as multinational as the old, only smaller. The previously "oppressed peoples" were now called "oppressed minorities." Although the Great Powers after World War I championed this principle of minority rights, they confined it to the European continent. The victors of the war divided its spoils, namely the German colonies, and absorbed

Adolf Hitler: searching for the German nation-state or global domination? [Toronto Library]

them into their own empires, refusing to admit that colonized people also had the right to self-determination. The Middle East and Africa was divided with little regard for ethnicity, tradition or language.

Despite the failure of the Allies to separate the old multinational empires into nation-states, the power of the nation-state idea continued to grow through the establishment of such organizations as the League of Nations (and later the United Nations). Such institutions created an international system that considered the nation-state as the principal actor on the world stage. The privilege of being a member in this system meant being able to voice one's national interest in a forum among other nation-states. Here too, however, the League of Nations (another Wilson idea) did not live up to its promise since, ironically, the American Congress refused to join.

Following World War I, new means of expressing nationalism emerged. The modern mass media—through newspapers, the radio and, later, television—became nationalizing agents. In parts of the world where the government controlled such communications, the people received little that was not nationalistic propaganda. National symbols became part of the lives of individuals as the divisions between the public and the private lives of each citizen began to disappear. Between the wars, sporting events became an even more important expression of the nation. The sports teams and players embodied the spirit of their nation-states as was witnessed by Hitler's use of the 1936 Olympics to instill pride in and cohesion among the Germanic peoples..

National self-determination and the defense of minority rights were used by Adolf Hitler—who many historians have called the ultimate "Wilsonian"—to justify his engulfment of Austria and Czechoslovakia as protecting the interests of their German-speaking populations and the natural evolution of German national unification. This was an argument that the other European powers found hard to counter as they, at least publicly, voiced support for the nation-state ideal.

After World War II, the Dumbarton Oaks proposals, which formed the basis of the United Nations Charter, purposely played down the issue of minority rights. Furthermore, no mention of the principle of self-determination was made until the Soviet Union proposed an amendment with the phrase "based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination."

Change Since 1945

Since the Second World War, the incidence of inter-state conflict has been significantly less than conflict between governments and independently organized armed groups. With the breakup of the Yugoslav state, the world has witnessed three instances since the end of World War II of a modern multi-ethnic state collapsing (Pakistan in 1971, and the former USSR in 1991 before it). Within the "new world order" of the post-Cold War world, separatist groups are forming throughout the Middle East, Southern and Central Asia and parts of Europe. As Turks and Russians attempt succession from Moldavia, Serbs are declaring independence from Croatia and Bosnia, and Tamils fight for independence from Sri Lanka.

The outburst of separatist groups can be seen through the perspective of the United Nations and international law. Theoretically, the system of international law regulates relations between subjects to maintain order. These subjects are entities (i.e. nation-states) which according to the law have gained legal personality and are recognized to possess certain rights. This view relegates non-state entities and individuals to the position of objects of international law. Among many such entities include separatist groups and terrorists; non-recognition implies that the international community refuses to acknowledge their cause. The result is the proliferation of national liberation movements who capitalize on the use of technology as the "great equalizer" to advance their interests. In the place of international legal mechanisms which could render some form of coherent justice, these unrecognized entities are pushed to desperate measures to capture the attention of those who deny their presence as legal persons.

The nation-state, which has arguably existed since the late eighteenth century, is in a state of flux. It is difficult to imagine a world without nation-states. In our century, the rise of nationalism and the segregation of the world into national units has created intense feelings of identity within the citizens of each nation. Yet, it remains to be seen whether the international system will witness a proliferation of many more new nation-states, or if such states will be replaced with global or regional political institutions as the unit of international politics. ●

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