

The Nation-State Idea is Not Cast in Stone.
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I remember trying to explain to my small children what a "country" is. They understood neighborhood because we could walk around those streets. They even understood city because we could drive around such a recognizable entity. It was a little more difficult to understand state and really difficult to understand country. When they were a little older, they played with geography puzzles and learned to recognize the states that made up "the United States" and later "the world" and eventually saw this concept on a globe. These, of course, were educated children.

But what of children who live in villages elsewhere around the world, children who have never seen anything other than their village, have never known people other than relatives (family and extended family such as clan)? Can they really conceive or care about country?

A century ago, people in the Middle East, most of whom lived in villages where they knew only family and clan and regarded others as potential enemies or the "other," were told (by their European "liberators" from Ottoman rule) that they were citizens of new "countries." They were "Syrian," "Jordanian," "Iraqi," "Saudi Arabian," "Sudanese," "Lebanese," or "Libyan." Their only neighbors with age-old identities as countries were Iran, Morocco and Egypt. The rest were new at this game.

From the beginning of civilization when human beings built cities, they organized themselves into kingdoms and empires. When kingdoms and empires could not protect their cities from barbarian attacks, people lived in anarchy until some new strongman once more organized a new kingdom and then empire. During times of anarchy, when it was every man for himself, the only safety that people had was family and clan. The strongest members of those families protected the rest and became warlords, whom the rest obeyed without question. Survival demanded this.

Warlords fought with each other until eventually the strongest emerged and a new king emerged. Kings fought until a new emperor emerged. This is the story of mankind until the 18th century when something new appeared in the world: three revolutions at once: scientific, religious, and political, giving us the modern world we now have, along with its nation states, rule of law, and a global system that most of the world's countries have signed onto since the Bretton Woods Conference, hosted by the single superpower, the United States, in 1944, near the end of World War II. This amazing system has held until now.

But now it is coming apart. The state system that was imposed on Middle East in 1918 is in meltdown. The region is descending into anarchy and country borders that looked permanent are wobbling. People are losing faith in their nation-states and their governments which are not only not able to protect them, but have become attackers (such as Syria and Iraq). When dictators, who kept various sects from each other's throats, are themselves taken down, the sectarian hatreds rise to the surface and nobody can control them. Indeed, dictators are not the worst evil in the world. Anarchy is.

Those of us blessed by nation-states of long duration have forgotten that they are not natural systems, but systems based on institutions, customs, and history. Those in the Middle East do not have that. We handed "nations" to people along with democracy, which we thought meant "free and fair elections," and told them all would be well. Alas, what a mess we made. We need to stop tinkering and see what emerges when the smoke clears.

For a start: Iraq will fall back into the three parts from which it rose: a Sunni part connected to Sunni parts of Syria and Jordan; a Shiite part that will be absorbed by Iran along with the Alawites of Syria. And the Kurds will have a country of their own, as they should have had a century ago.

Libya will fall into three pieces too: Tripoli, Benghazi, and the Berbers in the mountains, who do not even speak Arabic. More surprises will follow.

It will be a new map indeed.

673 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of God's Law or Man's Law. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.