

# Forum

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## state of the nation

### *Dealing with Democracy and Diversity*

Ongoing efforts at sociopolitical reconstruction in Afghanistan and recent visions of a post-Saddam Iraq have rekindled public interest in nation- and state-building. Debates over these issues are not new, but in the past they have been isolated from one another. For example, most discussions about state-building disregard the issue of nation-building (or confuse the two).

This Forum attempts to repair this rift by concentrating explicitly on the relationship between nation-building and state-building in multicultural societies. Such societies offer the most logical focus for connecting discussions over nation-building and state-building since the divergence of nation and state is most obvious and establishing convergence is also most important in them. At the same time, more and more countries are increasingly confronting multiculturalism. This, in turn, has also fueled debate over the future of the nation-state itself.

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MARIN STRMECKI

Some argue that the nation-state is losing ground to supra-national identities and supra-state institutions because of globalization. Meanwhile, others point to civil wars and collapsing states as evidence that countries are actually being eroded by sub-national identities and sub-state institutions. In many places, the reality is that the nation-state is being challenged from above and below.

However, the nation-state debate, and the broader discussion about political organizations in general, is fundamentally about legitimacy and representative rule. The ideal of the nation-state is essentially a belief in communal self-determination. The legitimacy of the state depends on whether it effectively represents the interests of its people; and if these interests are held widely enough, we can rightly call the people who hold them a nation. In this sense, state-building is the crafting of effective representative institutions while nation-building refers to strengthening social cohesion within a community by identifying and developing shared interests.

Whether the nation-state is being overcome or undermined, the importance of identifying shared interests, achieving popular legitimacy, and effective democratic representation remains unchanged. The real issues at the heart of "the state of the nation"—now and for the foreseeable future—are how to preserve popular legitimacy and representative rule in multicultural societies, in an age of globalization and transnationalism, and in the face of fragmentation and localism.

The answers lie in studying the interaction between nation and state, identity and institution. Studying each of these topics by themselves is itself difficult, and there is little consensus about the nature of state or the nation. But understanding the interactive relationship between nations and states is a truly monumental task. To do this, we must: study the various forms of the nation-state that already exist, paying special attention to those with pluralist populations; understand the lessons they offer and the questions they raise; and then consider "new" ways of casting this relationship. The five articles in this Forum attempt to do exactly this.

Together they cover a wide range of the major issues surrounding the "state of the nation," from the broader theoretical debates about the nation-state and ways of fostering trans-ethnic national identity to the role of economics in nation-state building and the practical considerations of post-war state-building. However, this Forum comes at a time when some are beginning to forecast the decline of the sovereign state, and others are questioning the usefulness of "nationalism" in understanding contemporary politics.

The first prediction is premature. Meanwhile, even if the latter observation is accurate, the importance of developing effective political institutions that have popular legitimacy and represent widely-held values will never fade. Understanding the dynamic relationship between institutions and identities, whether in the form of states and nations or otherwise, will always remain essential to securing peace and stability.