

BREAK UP THE FALSE NATION STATE

Middle East's political architecture is flawed

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Europe is not breaking up, but the out-of-date European nation states are. That explains why Europe remains stable and peaceful despite a painful economic adjustment. The Middle East, on the other hand, is breaking up because political forces defend the nation-state concept, which is unsuited for conditions in that part of the world.

The writing was on the wall for such states more than 20 years ago: The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, Yugoslavia in the 1990s and Czechoslovakia in 1993. The message filtering through is that people stick together, distribute benefits and share burdens only when they share basic values in the first place; an analogous

perception of what is right or wrong, permissible or non-permissible.

The only way ahead for the Middle East is to bite the bullet and replace the existing European-style nation state with a political infrastructure anchored in one cultural orientation — ethnicity or religion — shared by the citizens.

It can be done only by the people living there, with their consent, and if it is steered by them. Foreign powers may help prod for, but not coerce, an arrangement; with scant understanding of history and cultures, they are prone to mistakes that deepen conflicts instead of build bridges.

FROM NATION STATE TO NEW MODEL

Universally, the European-style nation-state concept is giving way to a new political model built around economic internationalisation and cultural decentralisation.

Economic globalisation requires some kind of governance from afar, because economic transactions cannot be controlled from political decision centres that are too close to citizens. On the other hand, citizens feel that issues such as education and ecology, and daily activities not embedded in international transactions, should be controlled by political institutions anchored in local communities.

The European Union (EU) is where the future political model is unfolding. The EU has replaced the nation state for the political control of economics, industry and other similar issues.

The main problem is not the model; it is the difficulty of striking the right balance between EU competence and the prerogative of the regions or local communities.

Having said this, Scotland is going to vote next year on whether to stay a part of Britain. Catalonia is harbouring thoughts about breaking away from Spain. Bavarians may feel just as Bavarian as they do German. These regions all voice dissatisfaction not about the EU, but about the nation state and its repression of their traditional identity.

It is not in vogue nowadays to invoke the old Habsburg Empire and, even less so, the Holy Roman Empire of 10th- to 19th-century Europe.

Nonetheless, these political structures survived for many centuries precisely because they struck the right balance between economic internationalisation and cultural decentralisation — between what required a distance of power and what could (and should) be dealt with at a local level while respecting cultural characteristics.

So, a country can be made up of several, even many, cultural groups — provided that the political structure takes this into account.

KEEPING THE LID ON

But nation states like Syria, Iraq and Jordan violate all these principles. They are composed of ethnicities and religions, people brought together who not only dislike one another, but

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also harbour deep mistrust fed by memories of having fought each other over centuries.

They have not chosen to live together; they have been forced to do so by foreign powers.

The longer it takes for this lesson to be heeded, the more bloody the Middle East conflict will be, and the longer it will take to forge a true solution, instead of just keeping the lid on the powder keg.

The Soviet Union escaped blood-

shed because the nation-state concept was abandoned swiftly. The partition of British India in 1947 along religious lines probably prevented bloodshed on a massive scale. In Yugoslavia, where redress was not taken, the consequences in terms of human suffering are well known.

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lapsed out of sheer weakness and lack of ethnic commonality. This paved the way for the strong and resurgent Turkey we see today.

Middle East nation states are kept together by repression supported or tolerated by foreign powers. People are forced to coexist with others who share little, if anything at all, in common. Rulers drum up animosity towards their neighbours to justify repression. How can anybody expect this to last?

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