**States, Nations, and the Nation-State**

People often use the words “nation” and “state” interchangeably to mean “country,” but nation actually refers to something quite different. The first states were security organizations that had little relationship to the people within them. Inhabitants of France, for example, did not necessarily identify with the aristocrats running the French state. As late as 1800, only half of the people living in French territory spoke the French language. The French state today, by contrast, is known for presiding over a powerfully united language, culture, and identity. It was a separate step for people to become a **nation**: a group who share a political identity and think of themselves as a unit that deserves to govern itself.2 Sometimes states created nations, as in France. Sometimes nations coalesced first and then created states. Sometimes, especially where the state model was imposed from outside, states and nations never aligned at all.

**WHEN STATES CREATED NATIONS:** In France, Britain, and some other cases, states developed nations to encourage loyalty, repress rebellions, and more easily build armies, collect taxes, and administer the territory. In the process, states typically stamped out other languages and subcultures and created national symbols and legends with which people could identify. For example, by drafting men from all over France to fight wars, the French state forced them to understand

French and created common experiences and bonds. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, public schools became the primary tool for generating a shared language, culture, and identity. Thus certain states became an even more formidable kind of organization, **nation-states**. With a population that felt nationalist pride in serving and sacrificing for the national unit, states gained enormous capacity to exert power and shape their societies. They built up still stronger national identities and more integrated economies, and in times of crisis could call on very broad military mobilization. The results were not necessarily positive: warfare shifted from conflicts fought between militaries on battlefields to the kind of no-holds-barred violence on civilians that occurred in World War I and World War II. Wars between states had usually been limited, but those between nation-states often are not.

**WHEN NATIONS CREATED STATES:** In other cases, nations created states.

When people regard themselves as a unit separate from the governing state, they often become **nationalists**: those who demand their own state and seek to increase its power. Modern-day Germany was a patchwork of small states in the early nineteenth century until trade, the spread of printing and literacy, and religion made German the common language of this large area. Invasions by the powerful French state, especially under Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) in the early 1800s, unintentionally forced German speakers together and awoke the idea that they were a nation like the French. Nationalist songs, poetry, and literature blossomed. When the brilliant statesman Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898) forged the patchwork into a single state in the 1850s and 1860s, most Germans welcomed it. A similar process happened in Italy at the same time. In Japan, too, state followed nation. The Japanese had a strongly cohesive identity and culture years for a thousand years before military pressure from the United States and European states in the late 1800s led them to construct a powerfully centralized and modern state. Japan’s leaders felt they had little choice but to imitate this Western organizational innovation, and built a nation-state that was an even more unified fusion of state and nation than their European models. This process in which strong national identities led to the later creation of states had important consequences for these countries later on. In all three of these countries, a powerful sense of the need for the state to defend a shared culture was one factor behind their turn to the ultranationalist doctrines of fascism around World War II.

**WHEN STATES WERE IMPOSED OVER NATIONS:** With a few exceptions, the spread of state organization and national identity outside of Europe did not align cleanly. The main mechanism for the spread of the state model beyond Europe was colonialism. Technological advances and the powerfully centralized state model allowed Europeans to conquer most of the world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They drew their colonies’ borderlines to suit themselves, with little regard for the realities of language, religion, or culture on the ground. Colonial borders combined different groups or separated similar peoples in South America, Africa, the Middle East, and much of Asia. Eventually, colonial domination awakened nationalism in these regions, much like the German reaction to French invasions, and provoked movements calling for independent states. These movements led to the vast wave of **decolonization** after World War II. For the most part, though, decolonization resulted simply in the recognition of colonies as independent states that maintained their old colonial borders—creating states that mapped poorly onto local identities. Most of these former colonies had to start from scratch to build state capacity after the colonizers departed. At least initially, these new struggling states were upheld as units more by the external recognition of foreign powers than by any strong internal foundations.

A handful of places outside Europe, like Japan, were exceptions that took rather easily to the nation-state model. Some peoples with very long histories within established borders, as in the old kingdom of Thailand and at the cores of ancient empires like Egypt, Persia (modern-day Iran), or China, found the fusion of central organization and cultural unity fairly comfortable. Much more common, though, was that newly independent states confronted major challenges both in establishing basic internal control and in encouraging state-framed identities. Some struggled to build multinational identities, like in the ethnic and religious kaleidoscope of Nigeria. Others went through painful—often bloody— processes to rearrange colonial lines with identities, as in the separation of Britain’s Indian colonies into Hindu-dominated India and Muslim- dominated Pakistan and Bangladesh around 1948. Roughly half a million people perished in conflicts surrounding this “solution.”

In quite a few places, the post-colonial disjuncture of states and nations was so severe that decolonization produced states with quasi-permanent internal conflict. Such was the case with Iraq and Afghanistan—the two countries where the United States and its allies have recently attempted to foster the construction of nation-states. Early twentieth-century Iraq was a British colony that lumped a large population of ethnically Arabic Shi’ite Muslims, a smaller number of ethnically Arabic Sunni Muslims, and a long-oppressed minority of Kurds in the north. Likewise, modern Afghanistan was shaped by colonial competition between Britain and Russia. It ended up combining a large area of ethnically Pashtun tribes in its south with a mix of Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Turkmens in the north. Of the two countries, Iraq seemed the more promising context for consolidating sovereignty, with a stronger history of central government, oil resources, and a richer and more educated society. After a decade of immense U.S. pressure and expenditure, though, today’s Iraqi state has fallen back into a state of civil war. Afghanistan, meanwhile, lacks both a national identity and all foundations of a state: it is one of the poorest places in the world and has never had a government that delivered significant services to its territory. So far, building both state and nation in this challenging territory seems beyond the reach even of a hundred thousand American troops and half a trillion dollars in military spending.

In a few locations, then, the combination of state organization and coherent national identity created the powerful unit we know as the unified nation-state. Even in these places, maintenance of a cohesive nationstate has been an ongoing challenge. In most countries, a less solid alignment of state organizations and identity made those challenges more serious, sometimes to the point of the extreme instability we see in Afghanistan.

The next section delves more deeply and concretely into the interaction between the spread of the state model and the construction of national identities. This relationship, compelled by a very particular political format forged in early modern Europe, continues to fundamentally shape countries today.