

# Whither Nation-Building?

Written by Harris Mylonas

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HARRIS MYLONAS, MAY 8 2013

In my book, *The Politics of Nation-Building*,<sup>[1]</sup> I explore the reasons behind a state's choice to assimilate, accommodate, or exclude ethnic groups within its territory. I develop a theory that focuses on the international politics of nation-building arguing that a state's nation-building policies toward non-core groups — any aggregation of individuals perceived as an unassimilated ethnic group by the ruling elite of a state — are influenced by both its foreign policy goals and its relations with the external patrons of these groups. Through a detailed study of the interwar Balkans, I conclude that the way a state treats a non-core group within its own borders is determined largely by whether the state's foreign policy is revisionist or cleaves to the international status quo, and whether it is allied or in rivalry with that group's external patrons. However, as I admit in the book, this argument does not travel to states where the ruling elites are not motivated by a homogenizing imperative.

Some places in the world are run by core groups consisting of apparent minimum winning coalitions,<sup>[2]</sup> others by elites that go at great lengths to establish national states.<sup>[3]</sup> Why do some countries have leaders that try to make the national and the political unit overlap and others that opt to rule with a minimum winning coalition? One argument suggests that maybe the degree of diversity prevents the nation-building path in some cases, other arguments focus on the pattern of spread of nationalist ideology and/or the prevalence of competing ideologies such as communism, yet others put forth the importance of war-making and imitation of successful military tactics as a mechanism that accounts for the spread of nationalism and the nation-state system.<sup>[4]</sup> In *The Politics of Nation-Building* I build on some of these and suggest that the main reason that leaders adopt the nation-building option is the reality, or anticipation, of other powers using non-core groups in their state to undermine their stability or even annex parts of their territory.

The European story is well known and so are the interactions between the Russians and the Europeans. Tilly's argument that war made the modern national state may be correct but it is also based on an understood reality: borders were constantly changing during the centuries that modern European states developed.<sup>[5]</sup> But the Westphalian principles have been adhered to more in some parts of the world than others.<sup>[6]</sup> Border fixity did not only vary tremendously over time but it also significantly varied crossnationally across the globe.<sup>[7]</sup> For example, following the Treaty of Berlin in the end of the 19th century the borders of Africa “froze” after the decision of the Great Powers.<sup>[8]</sup> This led to a completely different incentive structure for both ruling elites and counterhegemonic elites in countries with “fixed borders”. Beyond the case of Africa, however, we can point to other places with similar levels of border fixity that resulted from different geopolitical configurations, such as Latin America—the back yard of the USA—or the Middle East, where the colonial powers also left their mark on the demarcation of borderlines.<sup>[9]</sup>

Overall, areas that were part of a geopolitical configuration that guaranteed border fixity had less of an incentive to pursue nation-building policies. Within these cases the only countries that I would expect to see nation-building policies emerging involve cases where an external power (major power, regional power, neighboring state, diaspora group and so forth) attempted to cultivate a fifth column within their territorial boundaries. Moreover, it would not be surprising if this phenomenon of external backing of non-core groups would be less pronounced in regions where border fixity was perceived to be really high. However, this ‘equilibrium’ becomes more or less sustainable based on the structure of the international system and the ability—real and/or perceived—of regional actors to defy these geopolitical configurations I described above.

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The crucial question today is: What is the future of border fixity in today's world? More importantly, what is the perception of the relevant actors across the world with respect to this question? The list of border changes is longer than we want to admit. One just needs to cite former Yugoslavia and USSR;<sup>[10]</sup> but more recently we find cases beyond the traditional spaces where nation-building has already made its mark like Sudan.<sup>[11]</sup> Discussion of border changes has also emerged in the case of Iraq, Mali, and even Syria. It remains to be seen if any such plans will materialize. Granted the list of cases could have been much longer if nationalist principles were to be fully operative but this is not a satisfactory answer. Even if we only get a few dozen of the hundreds of border changes we would get based on nationalist principles, the reverberations will be felt globally. Moreover, such a situation would further push the spread of nationalism, encourage external involvement, and boost nation-building projects across these areas. We are already observing manifestations of this dynamic, but more border changes would certainly intensify it. This in turn will have the direst consequences for the well being of ethnic groups that are perceived as having ties with external powers that are perceived as enemies by core elites. Shi'as in various Sunni dominated states in the Middle East are a case in point.

What can be done? The International community can impact perceptions of border fixity by either investing resources in upholding the norm of territorial sovereignty or by promoting regional integration schemes around the globe that would indirectly guarantee existing borders and, according to *The Politics of Nation-Building*, would also lead to accommodationist policies. However, neither of the two solutions is sufficient without important investments in economic and political development.

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