

ROUNDTABLE

Reevaluating the Nation-State

Introduction

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The nation-state is in crisis. The increasing mobility of capital and information, unprecedented waves of people moving across borders, and rise of actors, such as ISIS, unwilling to abide by the rules of the Westphalian system, challenge the very notion of territoriality, citizenship, sovereignty, and the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force. Studies on the Middle East and North Africa since the Arab uprisings took the region by storm, upending “conventional wisdom” held by many political scientists and scholars, have focused largely on the causes, genealogy, and procedural outcomes of the events. These are important, but as we shall see, the uprisings also highlighted the need to think carefully about how the modern state has changed, is being adapted, or has been superseded. How is the “state,” a foundational conceptual construct in the social sciences, to be located in light of these events? And to what extent do the concepts we employ and the language we use accurately reflect and allow us to interrogate realities, or do they obscure them? This roundtable aims to spark this much-needed discussion.¹

Each contribution points to alternative possibilities regarding the importance and nature of the state. All contributors agree that the state is a relatively recent innovation in human history—and neither necessary nor natural. But statehood matters, or at least has done so in the recent past. Being acknowledged as a state within the international system has provided legitimacy and afforded a set of rights. But conditions may be changing such that the “state” designation no longer provides the moral and material resources it once did. Are states simply disrupted in the process of reproduction, or are wholly new forms of authority and legitimacy being produced?

These essays also bring into question how societies are formed and governed. They turn our attention to the competing forms of belonging—often along ethnic or religious lines—that underline contestation over notions of citizenship and boundaries of the polity. For some, such competing claims are not new but rather were concealed by the apparent stability, and nationalist rhetoric, of authoritarian regimes. For others, these are moments of heightened competition that are expected to lead to new agreements over the definition and boundaries of the nation and, at least potentially, citizenship.

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Finally, the essays point to important questions concerning the relationship between territory and authority. They point out that various authority systems—of which the state is but one, and often not the most important—compete over the governing of individuals and territory. Thus, we need to consider the challenge of rethinking the concepts of authority and sovereignty.

In short, it is time to reconsider the state. The questions raised in these essays should apply not only to the Arab world, but globally as well. The rise of populism around the world, the crises in the European Union, the increasing privatization of foreign policy and security, suggest that the role and reach of the state may be at a crossroads. Certainly, as we reconsider the state, we have the opportunity to examine the varied experience of the Arab world.

NOTE

¹The roundtable emerges out of contributions presented at the workshop “A Hundred Years after Sykes-Picot: The Nation-State in the Arab World,” held at the American University in Cairo, March 2017.