Struggling in the world of nation-states

The date: 5 December 2001
The place: The city of Bonn in Germany
The participants: Representatives of 85 nation-states, the United Nations and fifteen International Organizations
The occasion: The celebration of the formation of a new provisional Afghan government after the toppling of the Taliban by a US-led invasion in response to the 9/11 attacks. Five years earlier, in 1996, the people of Afghanistan had welcomed the Taliban, who made an end to the ongoing struggles of warlords that had devastated Kabul. But within a couple of months it was clear that the Taliban had very little idea of what it meant to govern a nation-state. Organizing the state as a theocracy, they were more occupied with chasing perpetrators of Sharia law than with providing security, comprehensive justice, basic social services and infrastructure to the Afghan people.

The relief of the Afghan community of toppling the fanatic and intransigent Taliban was widespread. The international community of nation-states was relieved too and welcomed Afghanistan as a lost son that had returned to their midst. There were high hopes and great joys at the Bonn conference, on all sides. The international community promptly started to organize its human, financial and technical expertise to build the new Afghanistan according to the 21st-century norms and standards of the community of nation-states.

In 2007-2008, the international community was deeply engaged. All provinces had an international lead-partner deploying military and civil support with a Provincial Reconstruction Team in place. At the national level, large programs in training the military, the police and the judiciary were being implemented. Basic education and basic health care programs were rolled across over the country.

In 2009, US president Obama ordered a surge in the military presence in Afghanistan in order to deal a final blow to the insurgents who had regrouped since 2001 via a ‘capture, clear and hold strategy’ that was meant to chase the Taliban and their allies out of their strongholds.

In 2014, the ISAF mission came to an end. The American forces were the last of the international allies to leave the country. The fragility of Afghanistan was not resolved. The presidential elections of 2013 proved
a disappointing process with accusations of fraud, recounting and an international mediation to create a grand coalition. The Taliban have not been defeated. Ordinary Afghans are still suffering from insecurity and a lack of future prospects.

The date: 1 May 2003
The place: Aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln
Participants: The 43rd President of the United States, George W. Bush and the crew of the Lincoln
The occasion: To announce ‘mission accomplished’: The war in Iraq is over.
The war that had started in Spring 2003 was meant to bring about regime change in Iraq. The dictatorship of Saddam Hussein had long been the eyesore of the United States and other Western nation-states. The sanctions that had been instated in response to the presumed production of weapons of mass destruction in the country had barely been successful. Iraq had to be reorganized and rebuilt to turn this rogue state into a well-respected member of the community of nation-states. It was conceived as the start of a program of democratization that would eventually elevate the entire Middle East. Starting from scratch, removing the civil servants who had been loyal members of Saddam’s Baath party, the US took Iraq as a blank sheet on which a well-functioning nation-state was to be designed.

In 2007, the US realized a surge in its military presence to counter the increasing problems of insecurity and to curb the number of casualties. At that time, all ideas about building a better and more democratic Iraq had vanished from the agenda. Security was the only issue left.

In December 2011, the last US military convoy crossed the border between Iraq and Kuwait to mark the end of the Iraq war. Its legacy is a failed project – or at best, unfinished business. Ever since, Iraq has been struggling with its internal stability compromised by the insurgencies by Sunni groups and the Islamic State.

The date: 9 January 2005
The place: Naivasha in Kenya
Participants: The government of Sudan, the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Movement and representatives of the international community
The occasion: The signing of the comprehensive peace agreement after more than twenty years (1983-2005) of civil war between the SPLM in South Sudan and the Sudanese government in Khartoum.
The agreement opened the way for solving the deadly conflict by creating a new nation-state through the secession of South Sudan – to be decided in a 2011 referendum. There was great relief within the international community. The end was in sight of the endless stream of refugees, the large-scale humanitarian relief operations and spillover effects of this war that had caused instability in the region (Darfur, Chad). And rapidly the international community brought in their resources to build up a well-functioning state in poverty-stricken South Sudan. Embassies opened their offices, countless aid agencies moved in and multilateral agencies set up large multidonor trust funds to make the peace dividend happen in South Sudan. Consultants flew in and out to help set up a government structure, start training on organizational development and to turn a guerrilla movement into an ordinary government that could become a well-respected member of the international community of nation-states. In January 2011, there was a massive turnout for the referendum. 99% of the voters voted for independence and on 9 July of that same year South Sudan became the much longed-for independent state. Representatives from all over the world gathered in Juba to celebrate the momentous occasion. The people of South Sudan were thrilled and excited about this new future, filled with hope and confidence; a page of suffering had been turned.

In December 2013, the lingering conflict between president Salva Kiir and his former deputy Riek Machar turned into an interethnic conflict between the Dinka (Kiir) and the Nuer (Machar). Since then, 100,000 South Sudanese have once again been uprooted from their homes. The hope has been dashed that the country is on its way to stability and prosperity.

The date: 8 November 2005
The place: Monrovia, Liberia
The occasion: Presidential elections in Liberia after more than 10 years of civil war and anarchy. Ellen Sirleaf Johnson takes office as the first female president in African history.
Liberia and Sierra Leone had both suffered from more than a decade of chaos, coups and counter-coups, and warlordism. Unspeakable atrocities were reported from both countries: The slaughtering of entire communities, child soldiers being forced to kill their own kin, cutting off limbs as a regular practice. The mining of ‘blood diamonds’ kept criminal gangs and warlords economically alive.
In 2003, the warlord Charles Taylor was forced to leave Liberia by international pressure and by a massive movement of women for peace. In
Sierra Leone, British troops restored order after a failed UN peacekeeping mission. Gradually Liberia got back onto its feet and the presidential elections of 2005 were judged to be the most free and fair elections in the history of the country.

In 2010, the debt cancellation program helped Liberia to reduce its huge debt (US$ 4.5 billion in 2003, 800% of the country’s GDP) and create space for national and foreign investment and development. While the targets of most Millennium Development Goals will not be met by the end of 2015, education enrolment rates have soared and under-five mortality has declined. In 2010, Liberia’s economy was among the twenty fastest growing economies in the world.

In 2014, several countries in West Africa were hit by a massive Ebola outbreak. The epidemic nearly paralyzed the Liberian economy and brought the medical infrastructure on the brink of collapse. However, the country showed great resilience in standing together to combat the Ebola-crisis.

In the first three events (Bonn, USS Lincoln, Naivasha), ordinary people were barely involved. It is a telling fact that these events happened outside of the territory of the respective countries whose history was about to change. Yet the people were assumed to welcome the events. How could the citizens of Afghanistan not be happy about the toppling of the Taliban and the conditions for peace and prosperity that the international community was committed to contribute to? Equally, so the international community assumed, the Iraqis surely welcomed this new start that promised them a better life in freedom and democracy, the end of sanctions and the prospect of taking part in the rapidly accelerating globalization that would benefit all. But in both countries, stability has not been achieved and the support for the external intervention was not as broad as expected. The least doubt existed about the happiness of the South Sudanese who, after their decades long struggle, finally were so proud of their own independent state which, with the generous support of the international community, would operate according to standards that had proved to be so effective. And even the strong support of the Sudanese for their independence was not enough to create a stable new nation-state.

Only in Liberia the combined efforts of the international community and national pressure were able to restore the government in the country and create the basis for a restart of the process of building the nation-state.

Becoming a member of the family of nation-states and complying to its standards of democracy is not an easy struggle. Foreign injections of money
and expertise are anything but a guaranteed solution for the many challenges and problems inherent to the process of state- and nation-building.

From the perspective of the extended family of nation-states, it is no smooth ride either. In the interconnected global world the international community of nation-states struggles with the presence of dysfunctional members. If there is no globally shared system of standards, reliable governance, international security, trade, economic interests, communication, etc. are bound to suffer. The family of nation-states has huge interests in the stability of all its members.

**Nation-state: Self-determination and international acceptance**

The United Nations counts 193 members, all of them nation-states. Size – in square kilometers or number of inhabitants – does not matter: There are no criteria for the formation and existence of a nation-state. China and India with a population of more than one billion are nation-states and so are Palau and San Marino with a population of some tens of thousands. City-states like Singapore or Monaco exist side by side with Brazil and Australia. And there are no performance criteria – on economic, social or democratic performance – that can be used to allow or refuse countries membership of the community of nation-states. There is no square kilometer of landmass on this planet that does not belong to a nation-state. Some areas may be the source of dispute between countries, but the map of the world is a map of nation-states.

The nation-state as we know it is a modern phenomenon, which dates back no more than 250 years. But it is not without its history and predecessors. Empires, Kingdoms, Princedoms and Caliphates have been around for more than 4000 years, each with very different forms of governing systems, different types of leadership and different relationships between rulers and ruled. Without wanting to reduce world history to a few brush strokes, one can argue that the defining feature of most of these historical forms of governance was a clear separation between the ruling elites and the ordinary people. The latter were fully subject to the authority, the vision, decisions and whims, of those who ruled over them. Emperors and princes could, by conquests, marriages and inheritance, bring people under their rule or cut them off without people themselves having any influence.

By the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, the formation of nation-states started in Europe and the Americas (North and South). This process of profound change was initiated by new political and
philosophical ideas, which identified the people as the source of sovereignty. Subsequently, nation-states emerged all over the world. The nation-state became the unique and exclusive form of organizing people. In Latin America and Africa, nation-states emerged when colonial powers marked new borders on the world map. In other parts of the world, for instance the Caribbean and Pacific islands, there is no clear pattern in the formation of nation-states. At other times, it was the new political arrangements (the partition of India, the former Yugoslavia, Sudan) that created new nation-states.

In the end, there are two decisive features that define a nation-state: the self-reference of people who declare themselves a nation-state – the nation-state draws its legitimacy from the people – and the acceptance of that declaration by the international community.

This book conceptualizes the nation-state as an intertwined and inseparable reality – between a people and their identity on the one hand, and the territory within the state borders where they live on the other hand. This intertwined nature is first and foremost based on the sovereignty of the people: It is they who affirmatively define themselves as the ones giving legitimacy to the nation-state. The nation-state comes into being by this affirmative act of identification. Without that basis of sovereignty the nation-state ceases to exist. And thus the nation-state is not simply a set of institutions and instruments that is organized to run a territory – it is so much more than the state apparatus. The legitimacy of state institutions and systems presupposes the affirmative action of people who identify themselves with the nation-state and who adopt this nation-state as theirs.

But this throws up the questions: Did the people of Afghanistan ever positively decide to be a nation-state? Not at the time when the borders of their country were drawn as part of the process of marking out nation-states in the late 19th and early 20th century. And the Iraqis? They found themselves identified as a nation-state after Great Britain and France had divided the remains of the Ottoman Empire. The South Sudanese people in 2011 expressed without a trace of doubt that they wanted to be an independent nation-state. However, in view of the internal conflict that re-erupted in 2013 one wonders whether theirs was mainly a vote for separation from the North of Sudan rather than an expression of the will of all the many different ethnic groups to live together as a nation-state.

This points at the primary challenge of the nation-state: The affirmative will of the people to form the legitimate sovereignty of the state is posed as the basis without which a nation-state cannot exist. This affirmative will, however, has to be realized: It is a continuous and dynamic process of
The identity of the nation-state is self-referential. Only those belonging to the nation-state can decide what their collective identity is – and whether, for example, religion, ethnicity, culture, or language, are part of that. But this self-referential aspect of the nation-state is not stable or fixed over time, nor is it shared by all in those stable nation-states, even more so in more fragile nation-states. Dutch men and women today define their Dutch identity differently than their ancestors a hundred years ago. Afghans will define their Afghan identity differently than their ancestors, even if they value their history and traditions. The 2014 referendum for Scottish independence proved that the idea of what it means to be Scottish is understood quite differently amongst the Scots themselves. The decades long conflict in the Philippines is rooted in the identity gap between the Christian/Catholic majority and the Islamic minority, who both have a different idea of what it means to be part of the Philippines nation-state.

The nation-state requires the acceptance of the international community as its second defining principle. International acceptance is the flipside of the nation-state’s self-referential precondition. Nation-states that fail to be accepted by the international community are faced with an uphill battle for their existence. The current entities Puntland and Somaliland, which both came into existence following the collapse of the state of Somalia, still lack this international acceptance. Though much better organized and governed than Somalia itself, the international community does not want to accept the dissolution of the Somali nation-state. Without the international stamp of approval a political entity cannot be part of multilateral agencies, cannot conclude treaties with neighboring countries, has no recognized borders and cannot let its citizens travel as ‘its’ citizens.

That the two defining principles of the nation-state do not always fit together harmoniously is clear. Many people and communities have unsuccessfully claimed their self-determination as an independent nation-state. The sovereignty and with that the integrity of borders and territory are often deemed more ‘sacred’ by the international community than the claims of people for splitting sovereignty by secession. Again, internationally agreed principles, criteria and checklists on the basis of which this sovereignty will or will not be granted are lacking. It depends on the global power relations at the time that Papua New Guinea in 1962 was not recognized as an independent nation-state and Kosovo in 2008 was, is more the result of international political power games than of careful judgment. Although the International community has accepted and endorsed the self-determination of the Palestinians and although the majority of the members of the United Nations made that possible, it is much more vulnerable to global power relations than the recognition of Kosovo, which was more the result of international politics than careful judgment.
Nations have recognized the Palestinian nation-state, that has very limited impact on its position in the world as long as the political heavy-weights (the US and most of Europe) do not recognize Palestine.

The puzzling nation-state

The fact that the world is divided into neatly interlocking nation-states – borders drawn on the world map, their surface measured, their people counted, leaving no square kilometer undefined – may give the impression that we are living in a well-organized world of nation-states. The reality is more ambiguous. The nation-state is engaged in a constant struggle to define itself and to position itself in the family of nation-states. Even well-established nation-states like Great Britain, Spain and Belgium are struggling with who they are, how they define themselves and who belongs or who does not. And the family of nation-states is constantly struggling to create a shared basis for membership, to define when a community qualifies as a nation-state and to maintain order in the family.

Within that family, states like Afghanistan, Iraq and South Sudan are only the more extreme version of the ordinary nation-state that is struggling with itself and its position. The problem of the nation-state is much more systemic and inherent to the delicate construct of the nation-state itself. The nation-state is inherently unstable due to the need for affirmative identification by its people – people who change their minds, form new alliances, create new identities – and the lack of clear criteria and indicators for who belongs and who does not.

And thus we may question: Do we need nation-states in the 21st century? Is the struggle in the family of nation-states a waste of energy and of people's lives? Can we not do without this inherently unstable construct? Perhaps we should declare it not fit for purpose. Would it not make much more sense to separate 'nation' and 'state' and focus on building strong states with technically well-functioning systems and institutions? If that succeeded, the nation-state may well prove an obsolete construct. The answer is: no. Because if all we needed was a strong and fair well-functioning state apparatus, then how do we explain why the Catalans, the Quebegeois, the Scots want to become an independent nation-state? These people, aspiring to express their affirmative identification to a nation-state different from Spain, Canada and Great Britain, are living in states that are technically speaking functioning well, without discrimination, based on meritocratic principles, offering equal access to education, health care and jobs. If
the Catalans, Quebecois and Scots would be allowed to create their own nation-states, these very likely would be, technically speaking, in terms of systems and institutions, a copy of Spain, Canada and Great Britain. These people want their nation-state to be theirs, reflecting their identity. That is, in essence, the same problem that is causing so much suffering in Afghanistan, where Pastun, Uzbeks and Tadjieks are all looking for a nation-state they can identify with and affirmatively embrace as theirs. And that is the same struggle in South Sudan, where Nuer and Dinka want to put their mark on the newly formed state, and in Iraq where Sunni and Shia want to make sure that the state reflects their identity. It is on the level of the nation-state that these identity issues have to be solved, besides issues of economic, political and power interests, majority and minority positions. The solution of the problem of fragile states requires a legitimate sovereignty that depends on and reflects the people. It is real in Catalonia, in Quebec and in Scotland with well-functioning state institutions; it is also real in these fragile nation-states.

The nation-state is an intriguing phenomenon. This book is an invitation to take the nation-state serious. Analyzing the complex reality of the nation-state, including the sensitive and confusing issue of identity will bring us some insights that will help us to come up with better analyses and better policies for nation-states that are plagued by conflicts in which identity is one of the root causes.

The nation-state is the – for now – latest step in the way people have organized themselves into larger communities to manage their economy, to secure their safety, to share their cultural and religious practices. The nation-state as successor of the preceding empires, princedoms and caliphates, is the form to organize our societies in modernity. The nation-state, however, is unlikely to be the end of history, and we should keep our minds and eyes open for the next step. But until then, it is the form of our times and we should take that form serious and do whatever we can to make the nation-state more stable to meet the high expectations of its people.