

## Breaking Up Is Hard to Do: Nations, States, and Nation-States

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### ► INTRODUCTION

The *political geography* of nations and states can explain most of the wars, civil wars, breakups, and mergers that dominated the international news at the end of the last millennium and start of the new one. Some 20 to 30 countries were engaged in active conflicts in 2008, yet they make headlines in the United States only when they boil over into horrific bloodshed—as in Sudan or the Congo—or when they involve familiar countries such as Iraq, Russia, Israel, and Ireland. Many new countries have emerged as the former Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union fragmented into pieces. Closer to home, French-speaking Québec narrowly defeated referendums on peacefully separating from English-speaking Canada, but the issue just won't go away. East and West Germany went in the opposite direction, dissolving the boundary between them and merging back into one country in 1990. Political realignments and so-called small wars (as opposed to wars between superpowers and their smaller allies) became more prevalent after the end of the Cold War. With communism's collapse, rivalry between superpowers no longer kept the lid on simmering ethnic feuds.

To understand political events such as these, you need the proper terms. Before you can learn these terms, however, you must first *unlearn* them. Political geographers use the terms *nation*, *state*, and *nation-state* differently than most Americans do. For instance, Americans use *state* to describe each of the 50 federal subregions of the United States and use *nation* or *nation-state* to refer to the whole United States and to Canada. To a political geographer, however, a **state** refers to an independent, bounded, and internationally recognized territory with full sovereignty over the land and people within it—in other words, a country. In some cases, saying exactly when a political territory becomes fully independent and sovereign can be difficult. For instance, in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong, overthrew the ruling Nationalist Party, which fled to the island of Taiwan. They then declared Taiwan to be an independent state called Republic of China, but the mainland People's Republic of China still considers Taiwan to be a breakaway part of its own country. Equally ambiguous is determining when the United States went from being a **colony** of Britain to a state: on July 4, 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was signed, or in 1789 after defeating the British, ratifying the Constitution, and electing the first president?

While a state is a political unit, a **nation** is a cultural unit, a group of people with a common ancestry—regardless of whether the group controls its own country.

The root of the word *nation* comes from the Latin *natio*, meaning “birth, nation, race, species, or breed.” It connotes blood ties between people. A nation is the largest such grouping of people, which distinguishes it from a family, clan, or tribe. Nations see themselves as a cohesive group and as distinct from other groups. Most nations share a common religion, a common language, and accepted social ways of behavior that give it a common culture. These common cultural traits act as a glue to unite people within a nation and as a barrier to divide them from other nations. Not all people in the nation need to have the same language, religion, and biological ancestry as long as they come to believe in the myth of their common ancestry. The Greeks, for instance, hold to the view that they are the direct descendants of peoples of the ancient Greek city-states even though a massive influx of Slavs beginning in the sixth century so overwhelmed the native Greek population that Greece in the Middle Ages was referred to as *Slavinia* (*Slavland*).

Now we know *what* a nation is, but we also need to consider *when* a cultural group becomes a nation. To become a nation, a cultural group needs to develop a consciousness of being a nation and of foreigners as being different. The group members need to start seeing themselves as Brazilians, Tibetans, or Scots, not just as residents of a particular village and worshippers of a particular religion. Political geographers often trace the origins of national identity to the political philosophies of the U.S. and French revolutions in the late 1700s. Before then, most states were considered personal property of their rulers, but the new thinkers introduced the idea that states should express the will of their people. When ancestral cultural groups develop a *political* consciousness that they should be united and should rule their own lands, they become a nation. Most political geographers hold that even the Chinese, who have had cultural continuity over two millennia, did not evolve a national identity until European political ideals diffused to East Asia during the nineteenth century.

A nation is usually territorially based. We call that territory its **homeland**. It is the motherland or fatherland, the sacred soil. Some nations are lucky enough to rule their own homelands, as the French rule France. Other nations lie within a sovereign state but are officially recognized by that state and are granted varying degrees of **regional autonomy**, such as Québec (in Canada), Scotland (in the United Kingdom), Chechnya (in Russia), and the Navajo Indian Reservation (in the United States). Still others, with names like Zululand or Baluchistan, or Galicia, have no official status but are every bit as real to their sons and daughters. The vast majority of the estimated 5,000 nations in the world fall into this category.

There is thus a mismatch between the political geography of states and the cultural geography of nations. Several prototypical cases can be defined. If a nation's homeland corresponds exactly to a state's territory, that nation is said to be a **nation-state** (see Figure 13.1a), which is the political-geographic ideal because it does not give cause to anyone from within or from outside of the country to try to peaceably or forcefully alter the state's boundaries. Nation-states, however, are the exception rather than the rule. A survey of territories generally considered to be full-fledged states in 1971 found that only 9 percent of them could be considered nation-states. Some examples include Japan, Sweden, Portugal, and Costa Rica, although even these are rarely perfectly “pure.”

If the state and national boundaries do not match, the potential for conflict exists. A basic distinction can be drawn between a multination state and a multistate nation. A *multination* state occurs when several distinct nations are found together in the same political state as, for example, in Canada or South Africa. While this is

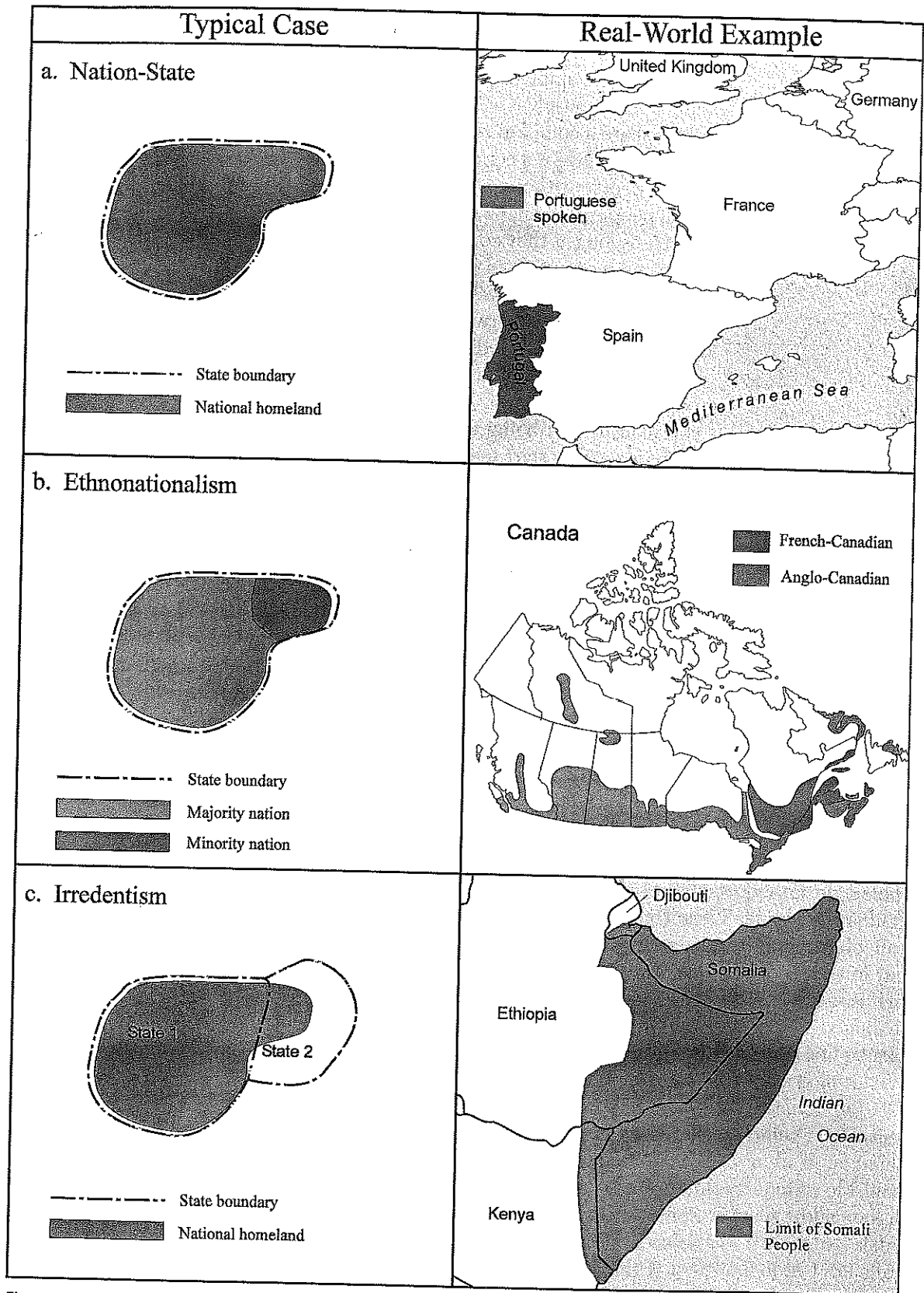


Figure 13.1 Examples of the political geography of nations and states.

not always a recipe for unrest (e.g., multi-national Switzerland), more often than not it leads to **ethnonationalism**, which is a strong feeling of belonging to a minority nation that is contained within a state dominated by a more powerful nation (see Figure 13.1b). In its weak form, ethnonationalism can lead to a desire for regional autonomy to maintain one's native language and traditions (e.g., Wales); in its strong form, it can lead to **separatism**, the desire to break away and form one's own nation-state (e.g., Québec in Canada or Tibet in China) or outright **secession** (e.g., Lithuania, which left the Soviet Union in 1991, or the Slovaks, who divorced the Czechs in 1993). Many separatist groups will resort to violent means to achieve their desired ends, and most states feel justified in using force to suppress these revolts and keep their territory intact. In fact, of the estimated 122 wars in 1993, 97 could be categorized as a state versus a minority nation within its borders.<sup>1</sup>

A *multistate* nation, on the other hand, exists when a national homeland overlaps into more than one state. In this case, one state encompasses the majority of the nation, and "outliers" exist in neighboring states (see Figure 13.1c). A multistate nation can give rise to **irredentism**, which occurs if a nation's homeland spills over into another state and the people on the "wrong side" of the boundary wish to join their territory with the rest of their homeland. Often, a sign of irredentism at work is when one of the nations refers to its homeland as "Greater \_\_\_\_\_," as in Greater Somalia or Greater Germany, which implies that the nation believes it has been constrained into only a portion of its true homeland. This situation existed for Germany prior to World War II, when many ethnic Germans lived in Czechoslovakia and Poland, giving Hitler an excuse to expand. The term *irredentism* originates from the Italian expression *Italia irredenta*, or "unredeemed Italy." Until the 1860s, the Italian peninsula was divided among a handful of kingdoms, duchies, republics, and papal states. In 1871, when the state of Italy was finally unified, Italian nationalists began referring to South Tirol, a key Italian-speaking region still in Austro-Hungarian hands, as *Italia irredenta*.

The French Canadian nation is a classic example of ethnonationalism that has led to a separatist movement. As with many such cases, one needs to venture across centuries and oceans to trace the roots of the current situation. In 1608, the French established a colony on the banks of the St. Lawrence River where the City of Québec now lies, two years before the first British colony in Newfoundland. Both the French and the British were after land, glory, aboriginal converts to their brand of Christianity, a shipping route to the Orient, and the furs of animals found in the cold northern forests. After 150 years of struggle between the two empires, France ceded virtually all of its North American claims to the British in 1763. Eleven years later, the British, in the face of unrest among the French population of 70,000 and not wanting to be diverted from the task of holding on to its more lucrative colonies to the south, proclaimed the Québec Act, guaranteeing French rights to speak the French language, practice Catholicism, and abide by the French legal system. Canadian provinces united in 1867 into the British-ruled Dominion of Canada, and its young people, including French speakers, fought alongside other soldiers from the British Empire in various colonial wars from South Africa to India. Canada was granted full legislative authority over domestic and external affairs in 1931 and acquired its own constitution and charter of rights (with full independence from the United Kingdom)

<sup>1</sup>Nietschmann, Bernard. 1994. The Fourth World: Nations Versus States, pp. 225–242 in *Reordering the World: Geopolitical Perspectives on the 21st Century*, George J. Demko and William B. Wood (eds.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

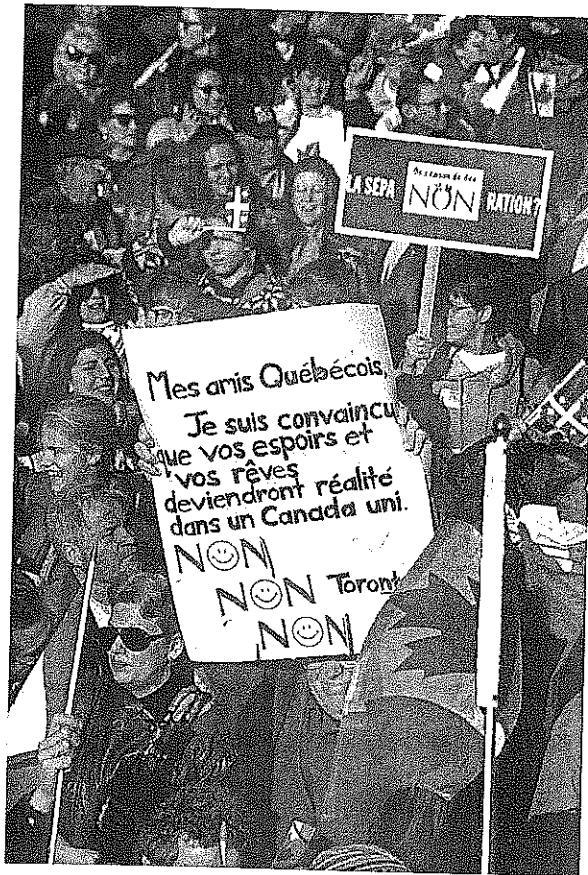
in 1982. As of 2006, the French-speaking population, living disproportionately in the province of Québec, had grown to 6.8 million of Canada's 31.6 million.

The French Canadian nation makes up the majority in Québec, and a substantial minority in the provinces of New Brunswick and Newfoundland (see Figure 13.1b). Because French speakers are such a large minority, the Canadian government conducts all public business in both French and English. The Québec provincial government, on the other hand, passed laws requiring that children of immigrants attend French-language schools and that Québec provincial affairs be conducted in French only. As a result, many Canadian corporations and English speakers moved to other provinces. French nationalism reached new heights in the 1960s and 1970s with the rise of an extremist group, the *Front Libération de Québec*, and a strongly nationalist political party in 1976. However, separatist referendums for Québec sovereignty failed in 1977 and 1995 because only a slight majority of French speakers supported it (Figure 13.2) while the vast majority of English speakers opposed it (Figure 13.3). In contrast to many other ethnonational situations around the world, English- and French-speaking Canadians have eschewed violence and pursued territorial goals through dialogue.

Not all international conflicts lend themselves to a clear explanation using the concepts of nations and states and homelands. The ongoing crisis in Israel between the Hebrew-speaking Jews and the Arabic-speaking Islamic Palestinians is a case in point. In this complex situation, both nations claim the same territory as their homeland. The Jewish historical claim is based on ancient occupation before the Jews were forcibly expelled from Palestine in two **diasporas** (dispersals of a population), first by the Babylonians in the seventh century B.C. and then by the Romans in the first century A.D. For the next two millennia, the region was home to Arab people who converted to Islam in the seventh century A.D.



**Figure 13.2** Québec pro-secession march in the last days before the referendum in October 1995. Supporters of a “Out” (“Yes”) vote to secede from Canada carried Québec flags and brandished nonviolent symbols such as flowers and peace signs.



**Figure 13.3** At a rally against Québec separatism in Montreal, the largest city in Québec, supporters of a “Non” vote pleaded to the “Oui” voters in French: “My Québécois friends—I am convinced that your hopes and dreams can become reality in a united Canada. No, no, no. Toronto.”

Jews began returning to Palestine and buying up land in the 1920s when the region came under British control. From the 1920s to 1940s, the British, the League of Nations, and the United Nations tried unsuccessfully to broker partition plans for dividing the territory. After the first of many wars, Israel became a state in 1948. The Palestinian people—who may or may not have seen themselves as a distinct nation at that time, but who most certainly do today—found themselves divided between those within the new state’s boundaries and almost a million **refugees** who had fled Israel proper to neighboring states on the eve of war. Today the Palestinians have won a limited form of regional autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip territories (Figure 13.4), two of the areas where the refugees settled but that were not the Palestinians’ original homelands. Any lasting peace agreement must overcome the resistance of hard-liners on both sides, the need of both states for a sustainable water supply, and the particularly thorny issue of Jerusalem, which both religions regard as holy ground (Figure 13.5).

Political geographers recognize two primary forms of territorial organization and government: unitary and federal. A **unitary state** is largely governed as a single unit by the central government. Although it may be subdivided into provinces or counties for administrative purposes, the central government dictates the degree of regional political control. A **federal state**, on the other hand, employs a two-tiered system of government with a clear and formal distinction between the powers of

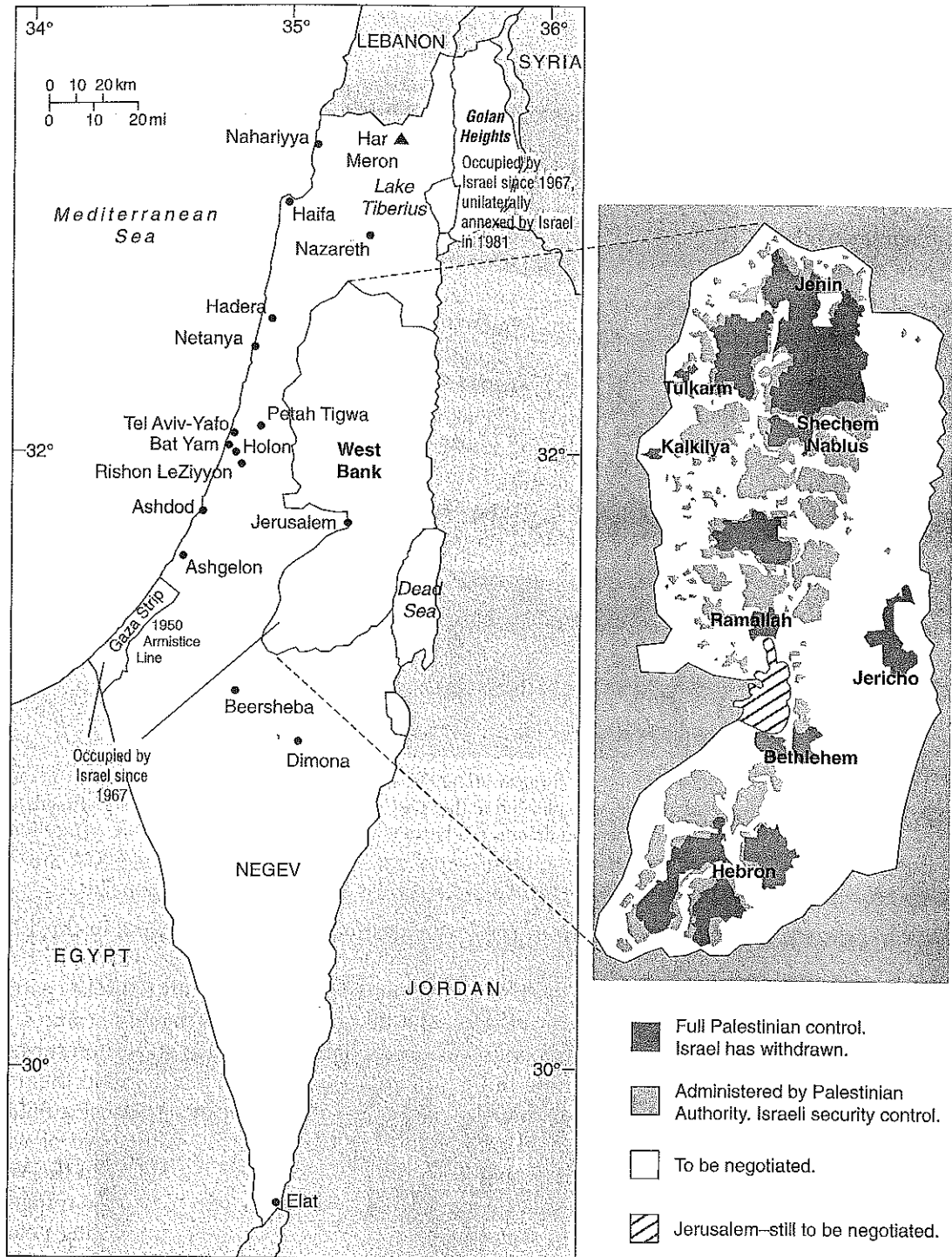
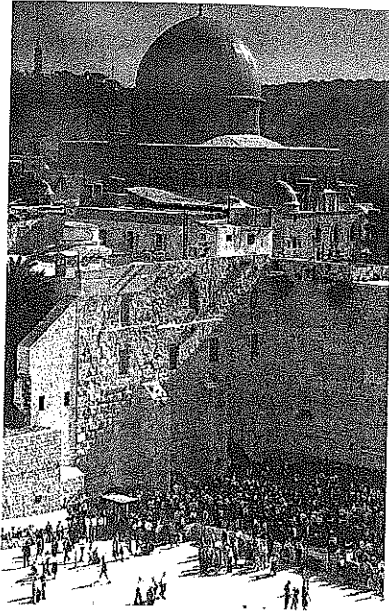


Figure 13.4 Israel and the Occupied Territories.

the central (federal) government and those of the lower-level administrative units within the country, often spelled out in a written constitution. Each region has its own capital, government, courts, and budget. Depending on the country, the regions can be called provinces as in Canada, republics as in the former Yugoslavia or former Soviet Union, or states as in the United States, although this usage is incorrect and



**Figure 13.5** In Jerusalem, Jews pray at the Western (or “Wailing”) Wall that is the last surviving remnant of the Temple of Solomon. Just above it can be seen the Dome of the Rock mosque, the oldest existing Islamic structure in the world, built in the seventh century on the spot from which Muhammad is believed to have ascended to heaven.

confusing from a political-geographic perspective. Most countries in the world are organized as unitary states, including France, Saudi Arabia, and Japan. Only 10 to 20 are federations, including the United States, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Australia, and India. China is organized into 32 provinces, autonomous regions, and special municipalities, but it is not considered a good example of a federal state because the central government can override provincial decisions whenever it pleases.

A unitary form of organization tends to work best in smaller states that are more compact in shape, have a single core region, and are dominated by a single nation. In such cases, the different regions often share the same agenda. Many European states and most former colonies have adopted a unitary system. Dictatorships are usually unitary as well. Federalism, on the other hand, allows diverse regions to coexist under a common umbrella that allows each province to maintain some of its distinct regional character. Large multinational, multilingual states with diverse environments, cultures, economies, or histories can function well as federations. States with multiple core regions, perhaps consisting of fragmented topography or islands, or facing communication difficulties, may function better as federations. The degree of integration can vary on a spectrum from a loose federation sharing only a few things like a common currency, passport, and army, to a tight federation with little regional differentiation of policy. Both federal and unitary states sometimes allow certain minority nations to have a higher degree of regional autonomy. Spain is a unitary state that gives some autonomy to the Basque region and Catalonia, while Canada is a federal state that gives some autonomy to Québec. In both cases, regional autonomy has helped blunt, but not eliminate, separatist movements.

Federalism often sounds great in theory, but history is littered with failed federations. When Latin American colonies won their independence from Spain, a Central American Federation was formed but lasted only from 1825 to 1838 before



breaking up into Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Other federations were proposed but never really got off the ground. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Arab/Islamic countries of North Africa almost united in a Maghreb federation as part of a pan-Arab, anticolonial union. The United States was almost added to the list of failed federations, when the South seceded from the North in 1861, precipitating the Civil War. In this chapter, you will either read about the former Yugoslavia, where a federation was not enough to hold together a group of nations with long histories of bloodshed and betrayal, or Iraq, which is hoping that a federal structure will encourage its nations to stay together without the threat of force from Saddam Hussein.

Many factors can tear at the cohesion of a federation—or of a unitary state, for that matter. Ethnonationalism and irredentism, of course, can divide a state, but other factors can exacerbate or mitigate their effects. If one region is much wealthier than another, the wealthier one may object to subsidizing the poorer region, while the poorer region may feel that the richer region exploits its natural resources or labor. Persecution of minority nations, underrepresentation in government and army positions, environmental degradation, and culturally insensitive policies can also fan the flames of ethnonationalism. On the other hand, many differences can be overcome if a state has a powerful *raison d'être*, or literally “reason for being.” Switzerland is a multinational state that is 65 percent German, 18 percent French, 10 percent Italian, and 1 percent Romansch, but its national ideals of nonaggression and international neutrality have proven to be a powerful glue to its diverse nationalities.

American students typically have little trouble understanding this concept of *raison d'être* because the ideas upon which the United States was founded—that all people are created equal and entitled to inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—are so well known. When it comes to the concepts of nation and state, however, vernacular usage of these words here and abroad creates a terminological chaos that clouds our understanding of current events. The United States of America is actually not a union of independent states but perhaps would be described better as the United **Provinces** of America. If the United Nations were really an organization of nations, it would have more than 5,000 members instead of the approximately 200 states that currently have seats in it. The term *international* in fact refers to *interstate*, while Americans’ use of *interstate* (as in interstate highways) really means *intrastate*. **Nationalism** has come to mean loyalty to the state, when it is often quite the opposite—loyalty to one’s nation. Of course, it is understandable that the dominant nations would confuse nationalism and **patriotism** (loyalty to the state) because for them, the nation and state are the same.

An example of proper usage of *nation* is in the *Pledge of Allegiance* to the U.S. flag. The expression “One nation under God” refers properly, if wishfully, to a *group of people with a common culture and ideals* (nation). Despite their lack of blood ties, most (but not all) Americans do share a common historical experience in that they or their ancestors came to the United States in search of opportunity or freedom. The lack of blood ties to other Americans, however, makes it difficult for us to fathom why neither the Serbs, Croats, Bosnian Muslims, and Kosovo Albanians of the former Yugoslavia (Activity 1), nor the Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds of Iraq (Activity 2), seem to be able to peacefully coexist in a “melting pot” or “cultural stew,” as Americans and Canadians do, without slaughtering each other. This same lack of understanding undoubtedly has led U.S. political and military leaders to underestimate the difficulty of stabilizing Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iraq to the point where foreign troops can be withdrawn.

## ▶ CASE STUDY

## BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DO

**GOAL**

To explain what can happen when **nations** and **states** don't coincide geographically. Using news articles, you will analyze the nations and states involved in either the breakup of Yugoslavia or the reconstruction of Iraq.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES**

After completing the chapter, you will be able to:

- Distinguish between the concepts of a nation and a state, ethnonationalism and irredentism, and nationalism and patriotism.
- Recognize whether a country is a nation-state, and if not, why not.
- Explain the advantages of regional autonomy and of unitary and federal systems of government.
- Critically analyze news stories on ethnic conflicts around the world.
- Interpret current events in the former Yugoslavia or Iraq in the context of their history and geography.

**SPECIAL MATERIALS NEEDED**

- Computer with high-speed Internet access and a recent release of a Web browser. If using the Student Companion Site with the printed book, click on *Tech Support* for system requirements and technical support. (If using the e-book in WileyPlus, click on *Help* for details about the system requirements.)

**BACKGROUND**

The crisis in the former Yugoslavia dominated international news during the 1990s. Iraq has done the same for the beginning of the new millennium. This chapter will help you understand these distant conflicts.

War in Yugoslavia killed about one-quarter of a million people, forced several million more to leave their homes and become refugees, and devastated a once beautiful country. The discovery of modern-day genocide just a few hundred kilometers from the borders of the European Union was truly shocking to many Europeans. Organized rape was used not only as an act of hatred and a means to demoralize the enemy but also as a way to dilute the bloodlines that form the very core of a nation's existence. A peace plan forged in 1995 by the Clinton administration was grudgingly accepted by the three major combatants in Bosnia—the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims—only to see the entire bloody scenario repeat itself in 1999 in Kosovo. An international coalition led by the United States intervened militarily to stop the Serbs from further ethnic cleansing of Kosovo. As of 2009, international peacekeepers, headed by the European Union but including U.S. and Canadian troops, still were based in Kosovo to keep the lid on the conflict and

enforce the peace accord, but had moved back from an executive role to one of monitoring and support of local institutions. The peacekeeping operation is—hopefully—in its final chapter before Kosovo's status is formally resolved.

Yugoslavia lies in southeastern Europe in an area that political geographers describe as a **shatterbelt**—a region in which state boundaries have been drawn and redrawn many different times over the years, largely as a result of being caught between powerful forces. The nations in the shatterbelt of southeastern Europe have been ruled by one empire after another, with occasional periods of independence. Shatterbelts tend to form in areas with two geographical characteristics. First, the areas tend to be topographically fractured (very mountainous), which prevents the emergence of a major power that might have integrated the many small independent nations and expelled outside invaders. Second, shatterbelts tend to be at a crossroads of trade and migration, which opens them up to outside powers and deposits new groups of people in their midst. Shatterbelts can have very complex geographies of nations and states. In the words of Vuk Draskovic, a leading Yugoslavian dissident, “The ethnic map of prewar Bosnia, and indeed prewar Yugoslavia, was like a jaguar's skin. The people were inseparably mixed. No magician could make ethnic borders on such a jaguar's skin.”<sup>2</sup> Other shatterbelts are in the Caucasus and Southeast Asia.

Unlike Yugoslavia, Iraq is not in a shatterbelt. In fact, Iraq's Tigris and Euphrates river plains were the heartland of several ancient empires. Like Yugoslavia, however, some of its past, present, and future troubles stem from the way its political boundaries cut across nations. Similar to Yugoslavia, the state of Iraq and its boundaries were created by an outside power—in this case, the British—in the first half of the twentieth century. Unlike in Yugoslavia, however, the war in Iraq erupted not over ethnic divisions but over global geopolitics, religion, terrorism, dictatorship, and oil. The ethnic makeup of Iraq, however, with Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, and Kurds, hinders resolution of the conflict.

Activities 1 and 2 of this chapter deal with the situations in Yugoslavia and Iraq, respectively. You will read a variety of news stories, analyses, and government reports about the ancient and modern histories of Yugoslavia and Iraq. Ethnic maps will help you analyze the current situations. Both case studies provide different types of print or online news media or official sources, each of which has only part of the story, instead of a single comprehensive summary. You will use these sources to answer fill-in-the-blank questions about the background to the crises, the conflagrations of violence, and the reasons it is so difficult to disentangle the nations within a state from each other cleanly. You will learn the reasons that, once a state is in place, breaking it up is indeed hard to do.

The U.S. Department of State and the CIA both recruit geographers (among others) to write intelligence reports, analyze foreign situations, study boundary disputes, make

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Roger Cohen, “The Tearing Apart of Yugoslavia: Place by place, Family by Family,” *New York Times* (May 9, 1993), p. 4.

## ► CASE STUDY (continued)

maps, and interpret satellite images and aerial photographs. In addition to several regional bureaus, the State Department has an Undersecretary for Democracy and Global Affairs, who deals with population, refugees, migration, human rights, oceans, and environmental issues. Some of the skills you will use in these activities are those that the agencies value highly in geographers, namely the abilities to read maps, apply terms and definitions to messy situations, and synthesize the historical, cultural, economic, demographic, and physical forces that act on a region.

A recent survey by the National Geographic Society found that only one in seven Americans age 18 to 24, the prime age for military service, could locate Iraq on a world map. Since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon and with the recent war with Iraq, the importance of Activity 2 on Iraq is painfully obvious. But why should you, a college student far from the conflict, personally care about Yugoslavia? First, the United States still maintained about 1,450 troops in Kosovo in 2008. Second, the United States has a population of minorities: Native American, Polish American, Hispanic American, African-American, Jewish American, Asian American, and so on. Although you may not be of Slavic or Muslim ancestry, the concepts you learn here will help you understand what is going on in other areas of the world to which you could have personal attachments. Nation-state conflicts continue to flare up between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland (see Chapter 12); in Punjab, Kashmir, and Sri Lanka on the Indian subcontinent; in East Timor in Indonesia; in Tibet (controlled by China); in Israel and Palestine; in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Chechnya in the former Soviet Caucasus; and between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo. Third, ethnonational issues exist in North America. As recently as the 1970s, Native Americans clashed with the U.S. government, and the two still

have conflicts over water rights, fishing, dumping of waste, gambling, and burial sites. Canada is officially a bilingual state because of French-speaking descendants in Québec, many of whom still want to secede from Canada. In southern Mexico, a rebellion by indigenous (Indian) peoples in Chiapas is ongoing; they believe the government does not represent their interests in struggles for land and improvements to their living conditions. Therefore, as a voter, as a taxpayer, as a friend or relative of a U.S. or Canadian soldier or peacekeeper, as a descendant of immigrants, or as a Native American or Québécois, you need to be informed about these issues.

*Note:* We realize that, by the time you do this exercise, the situations in Iraq and the former Yugoslavia could have changed drastically or faded from view. In *political geography, change is unavoidable*. We have tried to make this chapter as relevant and up-to-date as possible at the time of publication. Students interested in keeping up with the current situation should consult our sources: *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The New York Times*, PBS, *The New York Review of Books*, the United Nations, and the U.S. Department of State, or others including *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Economist*, and *U.S. News and World Report*, or in-depth journals such as *Foreign Affairs*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Current History*, *International Affairs*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *Ethnic Racial Studies*, and the *American Journal of International Law*. In addition, you can find current updates on the Internet (see Web References at the end of the chapter).