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# Dunbar's Dilemma: Statecraft, Informal Institutions and Human Limitations

The rise of informal institutions means that the state is becoming increasingly obsolete, right? Wrong, argues David Danelo. What we're really seeing is a shift in 'the relationships that matter'. Instead of the traditional ones between states, they will increasingly be between formal and informal groupings.

By David Danelo for ISN

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Globally minded security professionals spend considerable time, money and energy on schemes to achieve "state" stability. But harmony between states in the 21st century appears difficult to accomplish by making more of them. South Sudan, which the world welcomed with fanfare in 2012 as a United Nations member, took less than a year before devolving into chaos. Despite considerable American investment to build capacity and develop institutions, Iraq's western province—like Syria's northeast—is now a radical Sunni state. Both countries also contain moderate Kurdish zones more friendly to Western values. Regardless, Iraq and Syria no longer exist as displayed on the map, and the world is no safer because they have fractured beyond any hope of being reassembled. What happens next?

To answer this question we must investigate the global trend in state dysfunction. Why did it seem easier to fix foreign policy problems a generation ago by making new states than it does today? Has the world reached a terminal point in the number of states the world stage is capable of holding? And what, if anything, does this pattern suggest for the state's future health as informal institutions and unconventional governance become the 21<sup>st</sup> century's increasing norm?

## The Randomness of Modernity

Looking at a world map mounted on a wall or displayed on a computer screen, it is easy to forget that most of the countries represented as sovereign entities are relatively recent political inventions. In 1946, the United Nations had just 55 members. In 1960, fifteen years after its creation, it had only 99. In the next two decades, that number doubled. Today, the world organizes itself through the UN into 193 member-states and, depending on region, culture and ethnicity, a pastiche of *de facto* nation-like entities.

From Sao Tome and Principe to St Kitts and Nevis, the number of countries recognized by the UN has quadrupled in less than two generations—a stunning, unprecedented evolution in human organization. Amidst the Cold War's global struggle between communist and capitalist political structures, local ethnic, tribal, and clan power brokers asserted territorial claims of authority as Europe's hold on its

colonial territories receded. Throughout Africa, colonialism's residue left behind states that had been created in a way that made little logical sense. Nigeria was a patchwork quilt of three ethnic groups; Libya pitted the tribes of Cyrenaica against those of Tripolitania; Somalia bunched five distinct clans into a single state.

In retrospect, the randomness of what the United Nations considers sufficient criteria for a state to merit membership is striking. By any credible measure—population, terrain, political organization—entities like Kurdistan, Somaliland, and Puntland would easily merit state membership over the two dozen minor island nations scattered throughout the Caribbean Sea and Oceania. While it is mildly entertaining to watch the sparse Vanuatu and Grenada delegations pass in review during opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games, questioning their existence underscores the point: the world's states have evolved into existence for entirely random reasons. And our collective human brains are not likely to accept many more of them.

### **Geopolitics and the Neocortex**

In 1992, Professor Robin Ian MacDonald Dunbar, a British anthropologist and primate behavior specialist, proposed that the number of people with whom any one person can maintain stable social relationships has cognitive limits. Using studies on primate neocortex behavior and extrapolating for the average human brain size, Dunbar concluded that humans can only maintain between 100-230 relationships where an individual knows who each person is and how each one relates to the other. Dunbar's surveys of village and tribe sizes appeared to approximate this prediction; from Neolithic farming communities, to Hutterite religious sects to Roman legions, humans appear most comfortable organized in units averaging 150 people.

Dunbar's Number, as the theory is known, has been a wide-ranging subject of research, interest, and debate. Psychologists, business managers, and online social software developers have applied Dunbar's Number in their practices. The American author Malcolm Gladwell wrote about Dunbar in his international bestseller *The Tipping Point* and internet entrepreneur Seth Godin highlighted the phenomenon on his widely read blog, making the concept a commonly referenced term for the mainstream American public.

Ironically, many of the 193 United Nations member states matter less to how the world works than non-state or unrecognized regions. Iraq's Kurdish north has stabilized itself as a functioning state without the international community sanctioning its right to do so. As an island of commercial calm amidst a chaotic geopolitical sea, Iraqi Kurdistan has a flag, budget, constitution, democratically elected government, judicial system, defense forces and a dynamic economy. If freedom, equality, and liberty are Western values, Kurdistan's current unconventional structure provides them in far greater degree than neighboring states (both recognized and unacknowledged) can offer.

### **To State or not to State?**

If Dunbar is correct, then the number of states the world currently contains is already approaching the upper limit of a human brain's capacity to process relationships. Technology, economics and warfare have enabled humans to develop a greater degree of geographic awareness of each other during the 20<sup>th</sup> century than ever before, and the proliferation of states reflected that new awareness. But after the number of states grew beyond a comfortable size, something clicked inside the collective human neocortex. Regardless of language, ethnicity, or culture, very few of the current United Nations members speak idly about installing new states as part of their circle. Notwithstanding local conflicts (Israel-Palestine; Georgia-Abkhazia; Morocco-Western Sahara, and so on), Dunbar's dictum tells us the global table is full.

Unlike the 20th century, when conflicts were often resolved by making new states or breaking up existing ones, the current times call for acknowledging human limitations in state organization and recognizing that other political forms of order (or disorder) will increasingly dominate the map. The constraints of our collective neocortex to handle more states suggest that non-state (or unrecognized state) structures will play more significant roles on the international stage than they have at previous times.

In the past, the most dominant nongovernment organizations who acted internationally did so, either explicitly or implicitly, on behalf of states. In the 21st century, informal institutions will act with self-determination in their own interests, either with or without the permission of other states. Both the energy corporations who fuel Kurdistan's boom and the armed Sharia legislators of Al Qaeda's Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant retain an interest in securing their writ of authority over as much terrain as possible. But these conglomerates and clans will neither seek nor receive formal international sanction for the ways and means they exercise governance.

Not having an internationally recognized country does not preclude informal and unconventional entities from operating within the international system. On the contrary, informal entities are more nimble and flexible within their element of the international system than if they were states. Kurdish energy companies do easy business with larger multinationals, even as Al Qaeda Sunni radical fighters import resources from their Saudi, Egyptian, and Yemeni sympathizers.

Global security professionals owe Dunbar some thanks for reminding us of the limits of the international state system—and about why the system exists in the first place. But the British anthropologist also illuminates the 21<sup>st</sup> century's enduring dilemma: states will need to balance their own interests not against only other states, but also within the context of what seem to be an unlimited number of informal and unconventional structures. Because these structures multiply according to Dunbar's principles along geographic, economic, ethnic, cultural, and religious interests, each existing state will have to identify which informal institutions are most profitable to its state's health and which are most threatening.

Whether or not the magic number of states is 150 or 193 does not matter. Dunbar's work suggests that humans seek an ordered way of relating to each other in a manner they can understand. This exists not just with people, but also with states, which represent people. In the 20th century, those limited relationships that provided for and threatened a state's order were mostly other states. But in the future, the relationships that matter to states will often include informal structures. It's too bad Dunbar cannot offer more insight on how our fragile neocortexes could better handle the modern chaos.

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