Nation and Nationalism

The nation is an essential building block of international society. A nation is a group based on language, culture, religion, race, ethnicity, or other factors which lead its members to agree on their common identity. The only sure way to identify nationalities is to ask people to categorize themselves, since every other method may well be irrelevant. Nationalism is the expression of a group's national pride and/or desire for self-determination—the political autonomy of a given nation.

There is a fine line between healthy nationalism, commonly called patriotism, which motivates a community to make sacrifices for the good of the group, and chauvinism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, racism or any other sentiment that places one's own nation (or group) above others and engenders hatred and even war.

A state that can rely on the loyalty of a large portion of its population can mobilize a larger portion of its human and material resources that can a state that needs to impose its control with force and is unable to draw on compliant subjects. If a population is nationalistic, if it believes that its primary political loyalty lies with the people within the boundaries of its state, so much the better for the state.

Nationalism, which is now accepted as a normal characteristic of populations, is a fairly recent phenomenon that was not widespread even in Europe until the nineteenth century. It became common outside the West in the twentieth century.

There are three ways in which nationalism grows:

1) there may be, as in England and France over many centuries, a fairly stable state that gradually incorporates a growing number of elite persons into its political and economic networks so that among them a real sense of loyalty to the state, a shared language and a way of thought creates a sense of nationhood,

2) nationalism can develop in reaction to foreign occupation, to bullying by a foreign power, particularly if that power is itself nationalistic and uses its nationalism to justify its aggressive behavior,

3) it can develop when a people revolt or when elites create nationalism to provide a unifying ideology within an independence struggle.