

Future of the "sovereign" Nation-State – A new spiritual perspective 2025

Graham Nicholson*

For a very long time, including up to the present day, the nation-state, or simply the "state", has been the preeminent institution of the world order, around which the global system has been constructed. It is a concept of geo-political organisation that divides up areas of the planet, mainly the dry land, and the people thereof, into discreet areas that are asserted as being exclusively under the jurisdiction and control of a single system of government of some kind.

Ideas of such a state as a geo-political unit have been around for many centuries going back into antiquity. The concept has been one of variable content, from the evolution of the city-state with a common ethnic composition and then its emergence into a larger geo-political entities. It evolved into the great multi-ethnic empire-states of history such as the Greek, Persian and Roman Empires, covering vast areas and made up of a great mixture of peoples and cultures. As these empires rose and fell, more varied political relationships were established in the struggle for power and control of peoples and territories. Then in more recent centuries in Europe the concept has emerged as the "sovereign" nation-state¹. The whole process has been an evolutionary one, as described by Shoghi Effendi-

"....an evolution that has had its earliest beginnings in the birth of family life, its subsequent development in the achievement of tribal solidarity, leading in turn to the constitution of the city-state, and

*Phd, retired barrister, writer. The views the author has expressed are his own.

¹The reference to "nation" as used in this paper is not to be interpreted as a reference just to a nation or country with a single ethnicity. Rather the word is used in the sense of a geo-political entity comprising one nation-state whether or not its population has multiple ethnicities.

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expanding later into the institution of independent and sovereign nations."²

The term "sovereignty" comes from the latin "*superanus*", meaning "*chief*" or "*ruler*". It is not a term of precise mean. The concept of sovereignty has been the subject of discussion and debate throughout much of history and is still actively debated. Its definition, concept, and application has changed throughout, especially during the Age of Enlightenment. It has come to mean the essential condition and nature of a nation-state by which it is recognised as such within the present global order and within which it exercises its sovereign power and authority over its own area of the planet.

Political science has traditionally taken the view (although with some more recent reservations in the literature) that the beginning of the modern international system based on sovereign nation-states began with the Peace of Westphalia of 1648³. The characteristics of such a sovereign entity, often constituted with a monarch, was seen as ruling over a distinct area of land and its peoples to the exclusion of any supra-national authority or other body. This emerged in international law as being the characteristics required for the recognition of such an entity by the wider community, comprising a permanent population, a

²The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, Shoghi Effendi, (US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991).

³ *"The Peace of Westphalia .. is the collective name for two peace treaties signed in October 1648 in the Westphalian cities of Osnabrück and Münster. They ended the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) and brought peace to the Holy Roman Empire, closing a calamitous period of European history that killed approximately eight million people. Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand III, the kingdoms of France and Sweden, and their respective allies among the princes of the Holy Roman Empire, participated in the treaties..."*

Several scholars of international relations have identified the Peace of Westphalia as the origin of principles crucial to modern international relations, collectively known as Westphalian sovereignty. However, some historians have argued against this, suggesting that such views emerged during the nineteenth and twentieth century in relation to concerns about sovereignty during that time."(Wikipedia)

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defined territory and an independent government exercising sovereignty over those people and territories, with capacity to enter into relations with other nation-states⁴. This included the right to make war and peace. It was an idea that had philosophical support. Thus Hobbes advocated a complete concentration of power in the sovereign⁵. In more recent times the sovereignty in such a system has usually come to be vested in some form of a government of representatives, whether democratically elected or otherwise, rather than in a single monarchical ruler. But with appropriate domestic adjustments to reflect any such changed constitutional and institutional arrangements within the nation-state, the concept remains broadly much the same. It is a concept that has now been exported around the world after colonialism.

This concept was carried over into the Charter of the United Nations. That Organization is based upon the principle of the sovereign quality of all its members states⁶. In theory there is no hierarchy of nation-states. Even the smallest of nation-states can be seen to be "sovereign". The United Nations Organization itself has no independent powers of action to intervene in a nation-state without following the processes in the Charter, involving the consent of its members, and then only on limited grounds. The Charter purports to prohibit the threat or use of force and calls on all members to respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of other States⁷.

⁴Under the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, such a state must have a permanent population, a defined territory, a government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states.

⁵Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). His famous work was the Leviathan.

⁶Charter of the United Nations, Article 2.1.

⁷Ibid, Articles 2.4 and 2.7 and Chapter VII. It has to be said that the United Nations, in combining the quest for world peace whilst largely retaining the concept of state sovereignty as the basis of world order, has to some extent at least failed in its most basic objectives, in that violent conflicts and the threats of same have still continued in the world since its formation.

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But the ideas of nation and state as sovereign entities are not natural phenomena but are human constructs designed to meet the needs of the time.⁸ The voluminous literature on this topic, supported in many cases by the experience in practice, has increasingly challenged the view that in the contemporary interdependent global system, the nation-state is still fully “sovereign” in the conduct of its affairs, even within its national boundaries. There was and still is a perceived need to balance the claims of sovereignty against the need for an accommodation between different nation-states in the common interests of both. Talbott writes:

“There has always been, and always will be, a tension- sometimes creative, sometime destructive- between, on the one hand, the concept of an international community that recognizes interdependence as a fact and collective governance as a necessity, and, on the other, the appeal of a national community that thinks of itself as independent and sovereign.”⁹

But the absolute concept of sovereignty still exercises a profound influence and has many adherents. Bani Dugal¹⁰ states:

“at the level of global governance, the concept of unfettered national sovereignty remains the dominant paradigm, limiting coordinated and effective action to address humanity’s most pressing challenges.”¹¹

Particular nation-states often assert their absolute rights to sovereignty and can be prepared to go to great lengths to defend it. Thus one view of the meaning of “sovereignty” in its fuller sense is:

“Sovereignty, in political theory, the ultimate overseer, or authority, in the decision-making process of the state and in the maintenance of

⁸ Jared Diamond, in *The World Until Yesterday*, (Viking, 2012) suggests at 148 that state formation arose from an earlier practice of having tribal chiefdoms through competition, conquest or external pressure, the chiefdom being the most effective system of decision making to resist conquest or to outcompete other chiefdoms. Thus they were a human construct to deal with a divided and competitive scenario.

⁹ *The Great Experiment*, S Talbott, (Simon & Schuster, NY, 2008, 6).

¹⁰ Principal Representative of the Bahá’í International Community to the UN.

¹¹ Dugal, “Is the nation state past its sell-by-date?”, (Perspectives, 2015)

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*order. ... Derived from the Latin superanus through the French souveraineté, the term was originally understood to mean the equivalent of supreme power."*¹²

Taking this absolute view of sovereignty to its fullest, it envisages that nation-states can still use all the powers in their hands to achieve whatever result they wish for their individual countries or peoples, no matter how unjust or inequitable, including in declaring of war and in the use of violence and the grossest of abuses, as a justifiable national tool of state. There is on this view no limit, moral or otherwise. Arguably international law provides no effective limits, at least in practice. Subject to the requirements of aspects of international law such as to human rights, humanitarian law and the laws of war, there is no need to have regard to the wider best interests of the planet and all its people. While states generally observe international law and usually respect the rights and interests of other states applying rules of comity, this is not a uniform practice, and the continued existence of interstate conflicts and abuses testify to this fact.

Increasingly however there is a view that that absolute degree of nation-state sovereignty has been eroded in practice by the increasing interdependence of all nations and peoples in more contemporary times. Thus Sir John Boyd Orr stated:

*"We are now physically, politically, and economically one world and nations so interdependent that the absolute national sovereignty of nations is no longer possible."*¹³

And the late Maurice Strong stated:

"The concept of national sovereignty has been an immutable, indeed sacred, principle of international relations. It is a principle which will yield only slowly and reluctantly to the new imperatives of global environmental cooperation. It is simply not feasible for sovereignty to

¹² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/sovereignty>

¹³ Nobel Peace Prize Lecture, December 12, 1949.

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*be exercised unilaterally by individual nation states, however powerful."*¹⁴

Some prominent commentators go further and state that absolute national sovereignty is now incompatible with ongoing human survival. Thus Bertrand Russell is believed to have stated:

*"Science has made unrestricted national sovereignty incompatible with human survival. The only possibilities are now world government or death."*¹⁵

The cosmopolitan school of philosophy has a number of contributors, such as Derrida and Appiah, who have advocated for a secular global view of global citizenship and governance transcending the sovereign nation-state¹⁶.

Rodney Richards has written an article from a Baha'i perspective entitled "National Sovereignty: A Blight on Humanity"¹⁷, while Kenneth E Bowers has written another article entitled "Ending the Era of Unfettered National Sovereignty"¹⁸.

Some commentators see a tension between the dictates of national sovereignty and the desire for closer degrees of international cooperation, being advocates of the latter. But some current international events involving a number of powerful states engaged in conflict pose somewhat of a problem for this view. If anything, the current practices suggest that there may have been somewhat of a reactive deterioration in more recent global cooperation among many states, although this may be a temporary phenomenon. Some may argue that this reflects a contemporary movement away from the

¹⁴ <https://www.idlehearts.com/2448182/the-concept-of-national-sovereignty-has-been-an-immutable-indeed-sacred-principle>

¹⁵ The accuracy of this quote has not been verified.

¹⁶ For a discussion of cosmopolitanism and the Baha'i view see Nalinie Mooten, The Bahá'í Contribution to Cosmopolitan International Relations Theory, Online Journal of Bahá'í Studies 4 1 (2007) , 4-7.

¹⁷ Online at bahaiteachings.org, 2016.

¹⁸ Online at bahaiteachings.org, 2017.

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alleged hegemony of Western interests during recent centuries, but the explanation may be more deep seated than that.

Looking at the record of the nation-state in the last few centuries, one can safely conclude that the very concept of sovereignty has been at the root of so much terrible violence and suffering. The rise of the sovereign nation-state out of the Middle Ages may have resolved some of the conflict and chaos that occurred within national boundaries by the imposition of sovereign powers within those boundaries, but the concentration of power that thereby resulted may have increased the scope for interstate conflict. Nation-states, through their governments, have vied with each other to advance their own self-defence, power, control and in some cases aggrandisement. This often gave rise among the population to strong nationalistic views, even extending to what might be called jingoism. This has often been at the heart of war, mass violence and global inequities. Less thought has often been given to the wider deleterious effects of such an approach. It has not yet lead to a substantial theoretical revision of the sovereignty concept among nation-states, let alone to significant changes on the ground to the global order and its practice. Some regional alliances and confederations have emerged in recent decades of varied effectiveness in bringing the nation-states together, but overall the individual sovereign nation-state remains the centrepiece of the global system. As a result the associated threat of further mass violence and suffering involving such entities in contention has not yet retreated. This threat has become more significant and worrying with the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

In part this is because most national leaders still assert, at least as a fall-back position, the priority and immutability of absolute national sovereignty, at least when applied to their own country. This is not uncommonly supported by the masses of peoples within the nation-state who feel threatened or see no alternative for their own wellbeing. Those peoples tend to regard the concept as the best safeguard of their own national interests. In many cases the leaders are presumably prepared to use all means available to them to try and

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enforce that view and are usually strongly opposed to what they may perceive as any outside intervention in their domestic affairs¹⁹.

Commenting on this, Arnold Toynbee wrote:

*"Evidently few people are ready to recognize that the institutions of local sovereign states have failed repeatedly, during the last 5000 years, to meet mankind's political needs, and that, in the global society, this institution is bound to prove to be transitory once again and this time more surely than ever before."*²⁰

He points out that just as the number of sovereign states has grown since the Second World War, so they have become more closely interdependent on the technological and economic planes.

It is argued that in the light of many contemporary global events and circumstances, it is legitimate to ask whether the present global order, based primarily on the sovereign nation-state, best serves the interests of the one human race and of the planet as a whole. In a world increasingly characterised by interdependence of all its peoples, and with the science and technology that now lends itself to greater global connections, and with the rise of many great issues of global concern that require coordinated global responses, one has to ask whether the concept of absolute state sovereignty best reflects the needs of the time.

Transcending the nation-state

Given that the doctrine of the supremacy of the nation-state still exercises, both in secular theory and in practice, such a compelling influence on the global order, and given the view of some that it is a transitory doctrine to a better global order, what are the prospects of changing attitudes towards sovereignty to a more globalist position? Here we seem to run into a degree of inertia, if not avoidance and

¹⁹The international law as to the right of outside intervention in the domestic affairs of a nation-state remains controversial.

²⁰ Mankind and Mother Earth, (OUP, 1976, viii-ix)

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dismissal. The weight of divisive national and international politics seems to be too heavy against it.

Thus James Mayall²¹ states:

"..there is no immediate prospect of transcending the national idea, either as the principle of legitimisation or as the basis of political organisation for the modern state...The theoretical alternatives to this scheme have not materialised." ²²

The fact is that nationalism as expressed in the nation-state has proved to be an extraordinarily potent force, even as states have advanced politically and economically through multilateralism, and even as many countries have become more ethnically and religiously diverse and as people have increasingly crossed national borders. There was a glimpse of hope for some sort of a more profound supra-national form of thinking emerging around the end of the twentieth century, as the iron curtain showed signs of decaying with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and as nations developed closer links with one another. But in a more recent trend there has been a reassertion of the primacy of the doctrine of national sovereignty and the movement towards new forms of competitive rearmament and national ideological confrontation. It is no longer primarily a bi-polar movement between two great powers but increasingly it is a case of multi-polar competition. In most cases this has been limited in terms of actual large scale violent physical confrontation of the great powers, due to the threats posed by massive developments in armaments. Recent interstate violence has mainly involved smaller client states, partners, or so-called rogue states. But there is now a worrying trend towards substantial national rearmament and competition among the more powerful states. And the emergence of aggressive forms of religious fundamentalism pose more issues of concern, especially when combined with national sovereign power.

²¹ first Sir Patrick Sheehy Professor of International Relations in the University of Cambridge.

²² Nationalism and international society, (Cambridge UP, 1990, 145).

What are the prospect of rendering the doctrine of national sovereignty an obsolete doctrine?

Looking at the present very divided world order, a political observer may no doubt be inclined to take the view that there is little prospect, short of a major global catastrophe that brought the whole global system to its knees, of the doctrine of national sovereignty being generally displaced in operative terms by a more inclusive and cooperative global concept. The doctrine of sovereignty seems to have an entrenched global position in a divided, competitive and often nationalistically prejudiced world. That is not to say that there have been no vocal critics of that doctrine, at least as applied in its more virulent form of extreme nationalism. The doctrine lay at the root cause of two major global wars and many lesser conflicts, which in themselves indicates its inadequacy in an increasingly interdependent world. It also lies, when combined with national prejudice, at the root of the many global disparities and injustices. The doctrine has drawn much criticism. Going back to Harold J Laski, nationalism was seen as an obstinate virus or disease infecting the body politic of mankind. Erich Fromm excoriated it as our incest, our idolatry and our insanity. Bertrand Russell saw nationalism as the chief obstacle to the extension of social cohesion beyond national boundaries. Hans J Morgenthau saw the nation-state as rendered obsolete by the nuclear revolution. Many other prominent secular critics have expressed similar sentiments²³.

But it seems that in practice the major powers are not interested in such views and are clinging to this doctrine even in the face of, or perhaps in reaction to, the growing interdependence of all peoples. It seems that they are willing to pursue their own international objectives independently, or at least in alliances, usually only when it is in their own perceived national interests to do so. Lesser states,

²³See the discussion in *The New Nationalism*, Louis L Snyder, (2003, Transaction Publishers, 357-358)

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having secured their national independence post-colonialism, are likewise motivated to preserve it. The doctrine of national sovereignty continues to exercise a very powerful influence in the global scheme of things.

But is there a misconception here? In my view, any movement towards a more globally based order doesn't necessitate a complete abandonment of the doctrine of national sovereignty²⁴. In a more united world order, nation-states can still continue and can coexist within that order with a more limited form of national sovereignty or authority, much as the federal or provincial units of some nations do. For example, some form of a much more cooperative global order based on greater international cooperation, tied together with some agreed constitutional and institutional arrangements, would seem to be a step in the right direction, one with features that go beyond the present United Nations Charter²⁵. Taken further, another option may be a comprehensive and just global federal arrangement of all states, constituted by some binding treaty in conjunction with a new central governmental organisation for the whole planet to deal with matters of global concern. This could be based on some agreed, entrenched and binding federal global compact to which all nations accede. A reserve of power and authority in local and national matters could still be preserved in such an arrangement under a process of maximum decentralization, thus upholding the concept of unity in diversity²⁶.

²⁴ It has been suggested that state sovereignty can only mean absolute sovereignty. Such comments point to the difficulties of defining boundaries should a form of limited state sovereignty be proposed. But of course this is already an issue that has been addressed in framing federal national systems through the use of constitutional definition. That is not to say that it is an easy process to achieve, the greater difficulty being to obtain all state agreement.

²⁵ With the fall of the Berlin Wall it seemed that the leaders of the nations might well engage in greater international collective action. Of this the Universal House of Justice recently observed that this has now been assailed by resurgent forces of racism, nationalism and factionalism – message of 18 January 2019.

²⁶ In the Turning Point for all Nations, (prepared by Baha'i International Community, United Nations Office, N. Y., October, 1995), it is stated:

"Some fear that international political institutions inevitably evolve toward excessive centralization and constitute an unwarranted layer of bureaucracy. It needs to be explicitly and forcefully stated that any new structures for global governance must, as a matter of both principle and practicality, ensure that the responsibility for decision-making remains at appropriate levels."

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No doubt many other agreed and comprehensive provisions would be required in any such negotiations for a new global arrangement to ensure the success of such an arrangement and to guarantee its permanence. There is not space in this paper to list the potential matters for consideration in this regard in any detail nor to analyse the pros and cons of such secular constitutional/international arrangements and what they might look like. Nor am I expressing a view as to the likelihood of such a global political arrangement coming about in the near future, as this will depend upon the future changeable and often volatile relationships and circumstances among nations and peoples.

Whatever the changes that may be envisaged to the present world order to create a more united world, clearly it cannot be one that opens the door to some new form of global tyranny. It is not envisaged that the system of absolute sovereign states will be replaced by some form of an absolute, single, all-powerful global state. Such a proposition raises as many questions and concerns as there are with the concept of absolute national sovereignty and is most unlikely to be endorsed by any reasonable commentator. It would be seen as being a very dangerous concept. The question in this context is not what form of absolute global sovereignty could be imposed on the peoples of the world, but rather what form of binding constitutional/institutional joint arrangement could be agreed by the nations of the world in any move beyond the primacy of absolute national sovereignty. Whether this occurs as a matter of some form of global choice, or is forced on the nations and peoples following some terrible world events, is not something that need be entered upon in this paper. There is not space

Striking the right balance may not always be easy. On the one hand, genuine development and real progress can be achieved only by people themselves, acting individually and collectively, in response to the specific concerns and needs of their time and place. It can be argued that the decentralization of governance is the sine qua non of development. On the other hand, the international order clearly requires a degree of global direction and coordination.

Therefore, in accordance with the principles of decentralization outlined above, international institutions should be given the authority to act only on issues of international concern where states cannot act on their own or to intervene for the preservation of the rights of peoples and member states. All other matters should be relegated to national and local institutions."

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in this paper to analyse the many factors that could precipitate such a happening, nor the pros and cons of such a secular constitutional/institutional arrangement and what it might look like. It is simply argued that in an increasingly interdependent global order, the doctrine of the absolute sovereign nation-state no longer reflects the realities on the ground and, further, carries with it many undesirable and potentially destructive effects. This alone should be enough to precipitate serious discussion on possible changes to the present global order.

A New Spiritual Perspective

Most of the scriptures of the great religions have had no cause to consider the role and justification for the concept of the nation-state in the contemporary world order for the good reason that those scriptures predated the advent of that concept in its more recent manifestation. What has been written by some religious commentators representing various sects, denominations and views has been deduced for more general scriptural principles and hence it is limited by what they authoritatively can say specifically on this topic. Islam did have cause to deal with this topic in relation to earlier manifestations of the concept dating back many centuries, in particular as to matters such as treaties between rival groups. The one religion that has dealt with the more contemporary concept in a consistent and consolidated manner is the Baha'i Faith, having originated in the 19th century.

The Baha'i Faith, perhaps alone among the major religions of the world, has had cause to consider the place of the "*sovereign*" nation-state in the global order in some detail. It is unique in this respect and for that reason alone deserves consideration in the panoply of views out there, most of which are secular in nature. It seems appropriate to assess where the perspective of the Baha'i Faith sits in that ongoing debate, taking that Faith as revealed through the teachings of its primary figures, in particular the writings of the

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Prophet/Founder Baha'u'llah, His successor and eldest son Abdu'l-Baha, and the Guardian of the Faith Shoghi Effendi.

To understand the Baha'i perspective it is necessary to consider the approach of the Baha'i writings to the process of human history. This history is not seen as being merely a process of unrelated, accidental facts and circumstances as determined or influenced by the various human actors themselves. Rather it is seen as part of an organic process in which the human actors have played a part through their own decisions and acts, but which overall is subject to Divine guidance and direction.

Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet Founder, taught that human history throughout its entire length was an intelligible and connected whole, centring round a single theme and developing a common purpose.

In this essay, first published in *The Bahá'í World*²⁷, the author George Townshend²⁸ describes how, from the beginning of history to the present day and beyond the present to the cycle's distant end, one master-scheme is disclosed by set degrees. It is a form of historical interpretation that includes elements of predestination, but still leave room for the exercise of human free will. Overall the hand of the Divine is seen as being at work, guiding and encouraging humans through select individuals called Manifestations or prophets, the Founders of the great religions. It has operated on the human community from its earliest beginnings as very small groups, through various levels of human organisation and forms of unity. This has now reached the limits of this process as separate sovereign nation states, often resistant to any greater unity. It is from this position, viewed in the light of contemporary global events and circumstances, that a wider global unity can now be contemplated. Many factors now point in this direction in the light of many developments such as developments in science and technology, global communications and connections and the increasing interdependence of all peoples. The

²⁷Volume VI (1934-1936).

²⁸Anglican Archdeacon from Ireland later Baha'i Hand of the Cause.

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basic principle of the Faith that it seeks to be adopted and applied is that of the oneness of all humanity, that all humanity are one race and one great human family. The divisions that have so far existed between peoples are part of our inheritance but are to be seen as being only stepping stones to a new, much more united global order.

The Baha'i International Community has expressed the view that the current world confusion and calamitous condition in human affairs is a natural phase, although accompanied by many trials and suffering, in this organic process leading ultimately and irresistibly to the unification of the whole human race in a single social order whose boundaries are that of the planet itself. The human race, as a distinct, organic unit, has passed through evolutionary stages analogous to the stage of infancy and childhood in the lives of its individual members and in their forms of social organisation, and is now seen to be in the culminating period of its turbulent adolescence approaching its long awaited coming of age²⁹. Thus the goal to which a harassed humanity is seen to be heading is its long awaited unity and state of permanent peace as one human race on one planetary homeland. Commenting on this, the Universal House of Justice stated:

*"Permanent peace among nations is an essential stage, but not, Bahá'u'lláh asserts, the ultimate goal of the social development of humanity. Beyond the initial armistice forced upon the world by the fear of nuclear holocaust, beyond the political peace reluctantly entered into by suspicious rival nations, beyond pragmatic arrangements for security and coexistence, beyond even the many experiments in co-operation which these steps will make possible lies the crowning goal: the unification of all the peoples of the world in one universal family."*³⁰

²⁹Turning Point for all Nations, op.cit.

³⁰The Promise of World Peace, (the Universal House of Justice, 1995, para 53)

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Given this approach, it is not at all surprising that the Faith views the concept of the sovereignty of the nation-state with qualifications. Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Faith, wrote:

*"Unification of the whole of mankind is the hall-mark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation have been successively attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving. Nation-building has come to an end. The anarchy inherent in state sovereignty is moving towards a climax. A world, growing to maturity, must abandon this fetish, recognize the oneness and wholeness of human relationships, and establish once for all the machinery that can best incarnate this fundamental principle of its life."*³¹

To those who may see this goal as a forlorn hope, the Faith indicates that the movement to global unity is inevitable due to the forces, spiritual and material, that have been and are already at work in the world. While there are forces favouring disunity and the status quo, equally there are forces influencing the global community towards ever greater global interdependence and unity. These forces are a mystery to many, but are explained by the Baha'i view. The interplay of these forces is necessarily resulting in many trials and much strife and violence, indicating the inability of the system of very divided nation-states to effectively deal with them. Thus:

"The winds of despair", Bahá'u'lláh wrote, "are, alas, blowing from every direction, and the strife that divides and afflicts the human race is daily increasing. The signs of impending convulsions and chaos can now be discerned, inasmuch as the prevailing order appears to be lamentably defective." This prophetic judgement has been amply confirmed by the common experience of humanity. Flaws in the prevailing order are conspicuous in the inability of sovereign states organized as United Nations to exorcize the spectre of war, the

³¹The World Order of Baha'u'llah, (Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1974, 202)

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threatened collapse of the international economic order, the spread of anarchy and terrorism, and the intense suffering which these and other afflictions are causing to increasing millions."³²

The members of the Baha' Faith, although at this stage relatively small in number, are part of these global developments. They recognise that in the early stages of the evolution towards global unity, the forces of world politics will dominate. It is stated that:

*"Since sovereignty currently resides with the nation-state, the task of determining the exact architecture of the emerging international order is an obligation that rests with heads of state and with governments"*³³

This is therefore not a field for the Baha'is to take an active role, they being non participants in divisive partisan politics. Where the Baha'is are active is helping to create a wider consciousness of the oneness of humanity, a spiritual truth to which they are committed and which in the Baha'i view must be the foundation of an effective and lasting global unity³⁴. It is this concept that challenges the peoples of the world, from their leaders down, to broaden their horizons beyond the limitations of national sovereignty. Bani Dugal writes of this:

"Making the transition from nationalistic to global thinking is the overriding challenge of our era. It is also one of the most difficult, made more so by the degree to which present day leaders are bound to the paradigm of "national interest" in all that they do.

The answer to this conundrum, I believe, lies with a renewed focus on what is happening at the grassroots. For, only as people everywhere

³²Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, (Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976, 216)

³³ The Turning Point for all Nations, op cit.

³⁴It has been said that: *"Conceived of as an end in itself, the national state has come to be a denial of the oneness of mankind, the source of general disruption opposed to the true interests of its peoples..."* - A Bahá'í Declaration of Human Obligations and Rights", (Bahá'í International Community, February, 1947). But in the writer's opinion, the Baha'i approach to a reconstructed and more unified global community, in which a form of global governance exists alongside continuing nation-states, does not necessarily involve a denial of the oneness of humanity.

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come to understand their essential oneness will national leaders be forced to reflect this new reality in dealings at the international level.

The fact is that people everywhere are recognizing their common identity as global citizens – and, equally importantly, see that the pursuit of justice and peace is consistent around the world.

Ordinary people increasingly understand that humanity is one. The signs of this extend from the degree to which popular culture is now a global phenomenon – from football to Bollywood – to more urgent issues like climate change or attacks on the education of girls, where solidarity campaigns now make use of viral technology to organize and advocate for change.”³⁵

Any such global change is by its very nature an enormous challenge. Of necessity it must be evolutionary in nature, one step at a time. It has huge implications for the wellbeing of all humanity. Thus, for example, extraordinary care would have to be taken in designing the emerging architecture of any new international order so that it does not over time degenerate into any form of despotism, of oligarchy or of demagoguery corrupting the life and machinery of the constituent institutions and undermining the new level of global unity³⁶.

Likewise the structure must be such that diversity of different peoples around the world is preserved as much as possible consistent with overall unity. And the principle of decentralisation of decision making should be utilised as much as possible, again consistent with overall global unity. From this standpoint it does not mean that the individual nation-states would disappear. Rather they would become the constituent units of the new global order, exercising jurisdiction in local and national matters but not a form of absolute and unlimited sovereignty. The people of each nation state would still hold dear their national citizenship while also viewing themselves as world citizens in common with all humanity. In this sense the Baha’i

³⁵“Is the nation state past its sell-by-date?”, (Perspectives, 2015).

³⁶Turning Point for all Nations, op.cit.

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perspective does not adopt the absolute and unlimited concept of national sovereignty: rather it envisages a qualified concept of national sovereignty, which would allow the nation-states to continue and to exercise power and authority over national and local matters while accepting the need for a form of governance at the global level by global institutions in matters that truly require global attention and decision-making. At that level the equitable interests of the whole planet and of all humanity would be paramount.

In the Baha'i view, this plan is not just wishful thinking. Rather it is a plan that is subject to the overall guidance and direction of the Divine source, as laid down by the Founder/Prophet of the Faith, Baha'u'llah, the essence of which is as follows:

*"The Revelation of Baha'u'llah, whose supreme mission is none other but the achievement of this organic and spiritual unity of the whole body of nations, should, if we be faithful to its implications, be regarded as signaling through its advent the coming of age of the entire human race. It should be viewed not merely as yet another spiritual revival in the ever-changing fortunes of mankind, not only as a further stage in a chain of progressive Revelations, nor even as the culmination of one of a series of recurrent prophetic cycles, but rather as marking the last and highest stage in the stupendous evolution of man's collective life on this planet. The emergence of a world community, the consciousness of world citizenship, the founding of a world civilization and culture... should, by their very nature, be regarded, as far as this planetary life is concerned, as the furthestmost limits in the organization of human society, though man, as an individual, will, nay must indeed as a result of such a consummation, continue indefinitely to progress and develop."*³⁷

Seen in this perspective, the rise of the doctrine of absolute state sovereignty is, it is argued, just an evolving aspect of one phase in the ongoing global organisational development of humanity leading in time to further global developments. To those who live the doctrine

³⁷Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, op.cit, 163.

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and put much faith in and reliance on it, it will seem a lot more than that. It will be seen by them as the firm, necessary basis of world order. Hence there will be serious reluctance to modify or reform it to meet changing global circumstances. They may be content in the main to approach the subject from a secular, nationalistic point of view. But seen from the broader sweep of human history, and particularly from the Baha'i perspective of history, that doctrine does not have that degree of permanence or importance. Rather it can be seen as part of the transition of the global society towards a more united, a more mature form of global governance for all humanity³⁸. If the doctrine of state sovereignty no longer meets changing human needs, it is argued that it should no longer justifiably hold, in its absolute terms at least, our allegiance as members of one interdependent human race. As Shoghi Effendi wrote:

*"The call of Bahá'u'lláh is primarily directed against all forms of provincialism, all insularities and prejudices. If long-cherished ideals and time-honored institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formulae have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines. Why should these, in a world subject to the immutable law of change and decay, be exempt from the deterioration that must needs overtake every human institution? For legal standards, political and economic theories are solely designed to safeguard the interests of humanity as a whole, and not humanity to be crucified for the preservation of the integrity of any particular law or doctrine."*³⁹

The challenge is for world leaders, and for the wider population, in the face of rising global pressures and difficulties, to seize the opportunities to work gradually towards global order and peace on a

³⁸ Ultimately the Baha'i writings envisage that the term "sovereignty" attaches to the one supreme Deity of all, the "the sovereignty of God".

³⁹The World Order of Baha'u'llah, op.cit. 42.

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united, sustainable, just and effective basis, unimpeded by a doctrine which is losing much of its rationale and effectiveness. Human circumstances have in this contemporary age now changed significantly in order to reflect rising global imperatives. The alternatives involving the continuance of the present divided global order, it is argued, are not attractive when considered from the point of view of the best interests of the one human race and of the planet as a whole. Humans are already sadly experiencing the many deficiencies of the present global order, some more than others. It may take some momentous terrible shocks, which as yet cannot be fully foreseen, in order to give impetus to the calls for such a change. We shouldn't, it is suggested, allow the forces of the status quo and of privilege and prejudice to cloud our minds to the prospects of such a change, particularly if, as is argued, that change is seen as being part of humanity's spiritual destiny.