There is a growing perception or awareness that the geopolitical configuration of the world we are living in is being challenged by a rising tide of nationalist, secessionist and irredentist movements. A quick glance at some of the key political developments of 2014 may suffice to explain why diverse forms of state-seeking nationalism have started to catch the attention of social scientists, media pundits and the general public once again.

In Ukraine, for instance, Euromaidan protests and the ousting of Yanukovych in the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution gave birth to a series of secessionist reactions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. These movements occurred in the context of a Russian military intervention in Ukraine following the fall of Yanukovych. In March 2014, Crimea held a highly controversial - and still disputed - status referendum, where the people of Crimea and Sevastopol were asked whether they wanted to secede from Ukraine and join Russia as a federal subject or to restore the 1992 Crimean Constitution. Following the referendum, Crimea declared itself independent and immediately requested to become a part of Russia. Although Russia claimed that it was a legitimate accession process, Russia's incorporation of Crimea was interpreted as an act of annexation, the first in Europe since the end of World War II. While Crimean Tatars furiously boycotted the referendum, pro-Russian secessionist forces in Donetsk and Luhansk provinces of Ukraine followed the Crimean model, proclaimed their republics and held referendums seeking legitimacy in May 2014.

Meanwhile, in June 2014, the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" in the Middle East declared the restoration of the caliphate, which was abolished in 1924. Using the power vacuum that emerged in the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Sunni extremists had already declared the establishment of the "Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)" in 2006. When protests against the Assad regime and the civil war started in Syria in 2011, the ISI expanded its operations to Syria and changed its name to "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL) in 2013. After the declaration of the caliphate, ISIL started to call itself the “Islamic State”, affirmed its territorial claims in Libya, Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and launched a major assault to Kurdish territories in Northern Iraq and in Syria. As the already weak Iraqi state structure collapsed and ISIL forces advanced, the Kurdish regional government used this opportunity to acquire the disputed territories between the regional government and the Iraqi state (such as Kirkuk) and started to signal the possibility of an upcoming independence referendum. In June 2014, Mesoud Barzani told CNN in an exclusive interview that the time for Kurdish people to use their self-determination right has arrived. Although we do not know whether Barzani is really willing to push for Kurdish independence, a more radical development...
has been taking place in Western (Syrian) Kurdistan (aka Rojava). In the course of the Syrian civil war, Kurdish militia forces in Syria gained the control of the Rojava region, proclaimed their self-rule and gained the de facto autonomy of Afrin, Jazira and Kobané cantons. This multiethnic confederation – which is composed of Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Turkmens, Armenians and Chechens – declared its interim constitution in January 2014. Successful resistance of the Kobané canton against the ISIS forces in 2014 has not only helped this social revolution to be more visible in the international arena but also played a key role in the emergence of the pre-conditions of a unified Kurdish struggle by starting a rapprochement between rival Kurdish fractions and parties that operated in different geographies of Kurdistan.

Over in Scotland, an independence referendum to end its 307-year-old union with England and Wales was held in September 2014. Although 55.3% of the participants voted against independence, the referendum results showed that the support for Scottish independence increased from 30-35% to around 45%. This increase was recorded in the context of a historic 84.6% voter turnout, which is the highest in the history of the United Kingdom in any election or referendum so far. Following Scotland, in November 2014, Catalonia had a non-binding vote on independence, which the Spanish government tried to block. According to the results announced by the Catalan government, around 2.3 million people participated and 80.8% of them voted “yes” to both questions “Do you want Catalonia to become a state?” and “Do you want this state to be independent?” Another non-binding referendum - in the form of an online poll - was organized by Venetian nationalist organizations in March 2014. Although the way the referendum/poll was organized and its results - which indicate that 2.1 million Venetians (approximately 56.6% of all eligible voters) voted for independence – are highly disputed, this event successfully illustrates increasing aspirations by nationalist organizations to bring issues of “secession,” “self-determination” and “national independence” back to the agenda of the masses and general public.

In this almost chaotic context, the international media – once again – turned its attention to rising or ongoing state-seeking nationalist aspirations in the world. Newspapers started to publish interviews with leaders and supporters of existing secessionist movements, to make maps of active state-seeking movements, to discuss potential referenda or declarations of independence and to speculate on what the world map may look like in the near future if these nationalist movements become successful. In addition to the ones discussed above, recent news reports cite Flemish and Walloon movements in Belgium, Basques in Spain, Corsicans in France, Welsh and Irish in the UK, Quebecois in Canada, Uyghur and Tibetan movements in China, Palestinians in the Middle East, South Yemeni movements in Yemen, Pashtun and Baluch movements in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Tuaregs in Mali, the Saharawi movement in Western Sahara, Somaliland and Puntland movements in Somalia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, Aceh and West Papua movements in Indonesia and various movements in Congo and Nigeria as active secessionist movements that have closely been watching these current developments. Needless to say, this is a highly heterogeneous yet still a partial list of existing state-seeking movements of the 21st century.

It is difficult to assess the world-historical significance of the current wave of state-seeking movements by looking at these selective, heterogeneous and anecdotal examples. However, these examples alone
may suffice to illustrate that we are not living in a world in which forces of state-seeking nationalism have ceased to exist. Furthermore, current discussions of nationalism are strikingly different from those made in the 1990s. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR and the Eastern bloc socialist federations, many scholars and media pundits had already declared that forces of liberalism, democratization and globalization would bring the final demise of secessionist nationalism. As the following anecdote from an article published in the New York Times in 2012 suggests, today the dominant perception is the exact opposite.

It has been just over 20 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the last great additions to the world’s list of independent nations. As Russia’s satellite republics staggered onto the global stage, one could be forgiven for thinking that this was it: the end of history, the final major release of static energy in a system now moving very close to equilibrium. [...] Now, though, we appear on the brink of yet another nation-state baby boom. This time, the new countries will not be the product of a single political change or conflict, as was the post-Soviet proliferation, nor will they be confined to a specific region. If anything, they are linked by a single, undeniable fact: history chews up borders with the same purposeless determination that geology does, as seaside villas slide off eroding coastal cliffs (Jacobs & Khanna, 2012).

Although it is too early to jump to the conclusion that another wave of state-boom will chew up the territorial borders of the existing world in the upcoming decades, these kinds of statements show a radical change in perception about the future of our world. In the course of the 20th century, predictions about the decline of nationalist movements have repeatedly been made. The end of World War II and the establishment of a new interstate system in 1945, the success of decolonization movements in the 1970s and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s all revived expectations regarding the final demise of state-seeking nationalism. Ironically, almost every time it was declared that state-seeking nationalism was on the wane, a new upsurge was met with surprise. The revival of nationalism in Western Europe and North America in the late 1960s and the collapse of the USSR and socialist federations in the 1988/1992 period were among these surprises. So is the current wave of nationalism.

Dissipating some of the fog surrounding the current global wave of nationalist unrest – including its unusual geographical spread and curious simultaneity with interlinked social movements, wars and crises – is an important task and a major challenge for contemporary social scientists. Methodological perspectives, theoretical approaches and conceptual tools provided by comparative-historical sociologists are very useful for this task. My research takes a long historical perspective and explicates the complex relationship between periods of world-hegemonic breakdown/transition (Arrighi 1994, Silver and Slater 1999) and emerging structural opportunities for state-seeking nationalist movements in the world (see Karatasli 2013). I show that during periods of world-hegemonic breakdown/transition, (1) inter-state rivalries and warfare within the inter-state system increase, (2) social, political and economic crises intensify, (3) regional and social inequalities within existing states (or empires) deepen, and (4) frequency and strength of social revolts, rebellions and revolutions escalate. All of these
interconnected social, political and economic processes, in turn, produce a favorable macrostructural climate for state-seeking nationalist organizations to mobilize the masses, especially in core and semi-peripheral regions of the world economy. There is a flourishing literature on nationalism which suggests that nationalist movements are more likely to take place when wars erupt (Tilly, 1990; Wimmer, 2013), states are riven by conflicts (Mann, 1993; Mayall, 1994; Skocpol 1979), inter-regional inequalities deepen (Hechter 1975; Naim 1977) and other forms of social and national conflicts, revolts and revolutions take place (Beissinger 2002). Following in the footsteps of scholars who argue that these processes are more likely to take place during world-hegemonic transition/breakdown (aka “chaos”) periods (Arrighi 1994; Arrighi and Silver 1999), I show how these conjunctures of world-history become very fertile for secessionist movements in the world.

The period from 1550 to 1648 – the transition from the Genoese-Iberian systemic cycle to the Dutch world-hegemony – was one such conjuncture. From the revolt of the seventeen provinces (aka the Dutch War of Independence) to the Catalan uprising and the Portuguese War of Independence, this era saw a number of state-seeking movements concentrated in the territories of the Spanish-Habsburg Empire. Another major wave of state-seeking nationalist unrest in the world took place during the transition from Dutch to British world hegemony (1776-1815). From the successful revolt of the thirteen colonies to various creole uprisings in Latin America, from Irish rebellion to Haiti revolution, state-seeking movements with interlinked wars, revolts and rebellions spread to both sides of the Atlantic in this period. Likewise, the transition from UK to US world-hegemony - that started in the late 19th century, came to a peak during WWI and ended in the aftermath of WWII – coincided with the strongest wave of state-seeking movements and state-formation that world history had seen until then. Looking at these periods closely, one can see how wars, inter-great-power rivalries, a multiplicity of social, political and economic crises, and various forms of social revolts, revolutions and rebellions have historically contributed to the rise of state-seeking movements.

My research suggests that an analogous process has been unfolding in front of our eyes since the beginning of the crisis of US-world hegemony (Karatasli 2013: 343-392). This crisis started in the late 1960s, paradoxically deepened after the collapse of the USSR and it has escalated since the turn of the century. As the crisis unfolds, it gradually creates structural opportunities for secessionist, expansionist or irredentist state-seeking mobilization. From secessionist movements in Eastern Ukraine to the escalation of the Kurdish nationalist struggles and the independence referendums in Western Europe, current state-seeking movements have been utilizing a multitude of structural opportunities provided by increasing inter-great-power rivalries, inter-state wars, escalating social revolts and revolutions and/or increasing social, economic and political crises in an extremely complex set of ways.

It is important to recognize that these historically analogous periods and processes are not identical to each other. There is a major difference, for instance, in how inter-great-power rivalries unfolded and how they affected state-seeking movements during the Dutch and the British hegemonic breakdown periods. This process seems to be unfolding very differently during the current US hegemonic breakdown period. These sorts of differences are extremely critical for understanding the evolution of the modern inter-state system, emergent state-society configurations and changing forms of state-seeking (nationalist) movements.
Furthermore, this multitude of conflicts and crises do not create nations, nationalist sentiments or movements. They provide extraordinary contexts or environments under which state-seeking mobilization is more feasible than usual. For instance, while the long historical struggle for an independent Catalonia cannot be reduced to economic dynamics, Catalan nationalists see the Eurozone crisis as a historic opportunity for nationalist mobilization. As Joseph Vila d’Abadal put it in an interview: “Europe is tired of paying for the south and Catalonia is tired of paying for Spain. [...] No region in Europe pays 8 per cent of its GDP to the government. Probably this is the best moment for us. As Einstein said, the world only changes through crisis” (Charter, 2012: 35).

As this anecdote implies, different forms of crises (political, social, economic, etc.) create different opportunities for state-seeking nationalist mobilization in the eyes of nationalist political entrepreneurs. Today, while secessionist movements in Ukraine use Euromaidan protests, the fall of Yanukovych and Russian interventionism as key opportunities, Kurds in the Middle East try to utilize the anti-Assad uprisings, the US-led invasion of Iraq or the ISIS siege for their cause. Of course, there is a significant diversity and unevenness in the temporal and spatial distribution of emerging structural opportunities for nationalist mobilization. Yet one thing is clear: As the unraveling of the US world-hegemonic order speeds up, more and more movements around the world start to believe that “this is the best moment for us.” Or, as 20th century revolutionaries once put it “The world is in chaos. The situation is excellent!”

Editor’s Note: The author is currently a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow of the Arrighi Center for Global Studies at Johns Hopkins University. His dissertation, “Financial Expansions, Hegemonic Transitions, and Nationalism: A Longue Durée

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