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International Relations in Everyday Life

IR is the shorthand name for the academic subject of international relations. The main reason why we should study IR is the fact that the entire population of the world is divided into separate political communities, or independent states, which profoundly affect the way people live. A state may be defined as a clear-cut and bordered territory, with a permanent population, under the jurisdiction of supreme government that is constitutionally independent of all foreign governments: a *sovereign state*. Together those states form an international state system that is global in extent. At the present time there are almost 200 independent states. With very few exceptions, everybody on earth not only lives in one of those countries but is also a citizen of one of them and very rarely of more than one. So virtually every man, woman and child on earth is connected to a particular state, and via that state to the state system which affects their lives in important ways that they may not be fully aware of.

States are independent of each other, at least legally: they have sovereignty. But that does not mean they are isolated or insulated from each other. On the contrary, they adjoin each other and affect each other and must therefore somehow find ways to coexist and to deal with each other. In other words, they form a state system, which is a core subject of IR. Furthermore, states are usually embedded in international markets which affect the policies of their governments and the wealth and welfare of their citizens. That requires that they enter into relations with each other. Complete isolation is usually not an option. When states are isolated and cut off from the state system, either by their own government or by foreign powers, the people usually suffer as a result. That has been the situation recently with regard to Burma, Libya, North Korea, Iraq and Iran. Like most other social systems, the state system can have certain advantages and disadvantages for the states involved and their people. IR is the study of the nature and consequences of these international relations.

The state system is a distinctive way of organizing political life on earth which has deep historical roots. There have been state systems at different times and places in different parts of the world: for example, in ancient India, in ancient Greece and in Renaissance Italy (Watson 1992). However, the subject of IR conventionally dates back to the early modern era (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) in Europe, when sovereign states based on adjacent territories were initially established. Ever since the eighteenth century the relations between such independent states have been labelled 'international relations'. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the state system was expanded to encompass the entire territory of the earth. The world of states is basically a territorial world: it is a way of politically organizing the world's populated territory, a distinctive kind of territorial political organization, based on numerous different governments that are legally independent of each other. The only large territory that is not a state is Antarctica, and it is administered by a consortium of states. Today IR is the study of the global state system from various scholarly perspectives, the most important of which shall be discussed in this book.