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Strategic Insights: Fragile States Cannot Be Fixed With State-Building

July 27, 2015 | Dr. Robert D. Lamb

The problem with the way the international community thinks about and responds to fragile states is not that we do not understand “fragility,” its causes, and its cures, but that we think of them as “states,” as coherent units of analysis. As a result of this strategic level mistake, efforts to build state capacity to contain violence and reduce poverty are at least as likely to destabilize the country as they are to help. The U.S. military should consider the destabilizing potential of its efforts to build capacity, train and equip security forces, and provide support to diplomacy and development when its partners and beneficiaries are officials of fragile states.

State formation has always been an exceedingly bloody endeavor. Most stable countries worthy of the term “state” that are stable, including wealthy, Western, liberal, or democratic nation-states, came into being through complicated social processes, including war, ethnic cleansing, or genocide. That violence was followed by an institutionalization of the values and social priorities of the victors, combined with some degree of accommodation for the vanquished across and within the new state’s borders.

State formation, in other words, has always been a matter of violent exclusion followed by pragmatic inclusion. In all successful states today, those processes have resulted in stable formal political systems, with a significant degree of internal consensus over how those systems should be governed.

Today, a quarter of the world’s population, and half of the world’s poor people by some estimates, live in places commonly referred to as “fragile states,” beset by conflict, poverty traps, low social cohesion and, in many cases, cycles of violence and terror. These pathologies are not contained within the borders of fragile states, however. As it is ritually noted in most articles on state fragility, these are places that often generate dangerous

spillovers: regional tensions, international terrorism, transnational organized crime, an inability to contain outbreaks of disease, and other problems generally associated with the term “instability.”

But fragile states are not “states” in the same sense as those that are stable. They developed differently. They went through periods of tribal governance and warfare and, in some cases, territorial consolidation, as European states did, but then most were subjected to colonization by distant powers or severe domination by regional hegemony, in both cases with foreigners imposing borders and manipulating local politics, elevating one set of elites at the expense of populations with whom they did not share a tribal, ethnic, or national identity. When those foreign powers left (or reduced their footprint), the empowered elites either held on to power or were removed from power by their former subjects. In both cases, the internal fragmentation of views about governance—who should govern and how—remained and in all fragile states continues to be one of the most important determinants of fragility.

The most common international responses to these pathologies tend to be exploitation by regional powers, containment by developed countries concerned about spillovers of violence, and capacity building of national institutions by international development agencies attempting to address the “root causes” of fragility by building state structures capable of governing the way “states” are supposed to govern.

Looking at these two sets of countries—well governed, legitimate, and stable on one side, with poorly governed, illegitimate, and unstable on the other—it is understandable to conclude that, if only fragile states were more legitimate and better governed, they would also be more stable, peaceful, and prosperous. Post-conflict reconstruction, stabilization, poverty reduction, and other efforts to improve the quality of life for people living in fragile and conflict environments tend, therefore, to focus on building the legitimacy and capacity of state institutions, both military and civilian. Efforts to reduce the spillover of violence and terrorism likewise have key elements of state-building.

When, however, has state-building ever worked? That is, when has foreign assistance to formal state institutions and civil society over an extended period of time, in places whose borders were drawn by, and whose elites were elevated by, foreign powers but where local populations do not agree with each other over basic questions of legitimate governance, ever resulted in the establishment of a stable state, one that is no longer “fragile” (in the usual definitions) or at significant risk of a return to violent politics?

Consider the places often cited as state-building success stories. When I have asked proponents of state-building to name unambiguous successes, the responses most commonly include Germany and Japan after World War II, East Timor, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and sometimes Rwanda.

But Germany and Japan were already states with highly developed bureaucracies that were largely left in place after their military forces were defeated. These were not cases of state-building but of state recovery and, in truth, they have little to teach us about how to stabilize fragile states.

The borders of East Timor and Kosovo came into being as a result of wars; they are clear examples of state formation still in progress, and it is difficult to call Kosovo a success story when that country's stability continues to depend so much on an international presence. Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Rwanda have made progress, but they have not been stable long enough to be considered stabilized, and certainly they continue to appear on lists of fragile states.

Moreover, some post-conflict countries that have done things "right" according to the typical state-building script have dramatically regressed into violence—El Salvador is an excellent example—whereas some that have done things "wrong," such as Laos, have managed to remain stable for more than 40 years.

As a thought experiment, consider the following two possibilities. A fragile state is territorially fragmented along ethnic and sectarian lines, there are frequent civilian attacks between identity groups, the parliament and ministries are dominated by one group at the expense of the others and, as a consequence, there is constant low-level violence punctuated by periods of intense internal war and repression by the majority ethnic group, which nevertheless enjoys international recognition and assistance as "the" government and the "partner" whose "capacity" is to be built. Years of pouring resources into that government and its security forces serve only to strengthen one group at the expense of the others, providing counsel (and few incentives) to treat the other groups better while giving them the capacity to treat the other groups worse, thereby increasing the potential for conflict.

Yet, even in such places, there are some stable, reasonably well-governed territories and communities that maintain a great degree of independence from the central government, with consensus on how they want to be governed, capable of collecting the resources they need to do so (in some cases democratically), and able to defend themselves against external aggression. Somaliland is an excellent example, but most fragile states have similar communities (large percentages of Afghans, for example, have reported that the conflict this past decade simply never affected their community). Such places look suspiciously like they are engaging in classic state formation, and doing so with neither support from their national governments nor recognition from the international community—whose support of their national governments often undermines local, successful state formation.

I am not arguing that the international community should try to break up fragile states into more stable territories. Outsiders are not likely to be any more effective at redrawing the borders of fragile states today than the outsiders who drew the modern borders of those countries in the first place. But when a country falls apart in a civil war such that the state can no longer be said to be relevant in some areas of the country, or when the elites in control of national governing institutions fail to support or recognize the legitimacy of large segments of their own populations, due consideration should be given to those areas of the country that manage to stabilize on their own and govern the areas they control in ways that are more consistent with international norms than the central government is or had been. State-building is ineffective, and breaking up states is dangerous. International support to (if not recognition of) subnational state formation in fragile states is, therefore, among the more promising ways to think about how best to respond to fragile states.

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