

Civil Wars & Transnational Threats: Mapping the Terrain, Assessing the Links

Abstract: Among the primary strategic rationales for U.S. policy engagement in war-torn states has been the assumption that internal violence generates cross-border spillovers with negative consequences for U.S. and global security, among these transnational terrorism, organized crime, and infectious disease. Closer examination suggests that the connection between internal disorder and transnational threats is situation-specific, contingent on an array of intervening factors and contextual conditions. Taken as a cohort, war-torn states are not the primary drivers of cross-border terrorism, crime, and epidemics, nor do they pose a first-tier, much less existential, threat to the United States. Of greater concern are relatively functional states that maintain certain trappings of sovereignty but are institutionally anemic, thanks to endemic corruption and winner-take-all politics. Ultimately, the most important U.S. stakes in war-torn countries are moral and humanitarian: namely, the imperative of reducing suffering among fellow members of our species.

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The Sovereignty Wars: Reconciling America with the World (2017), *Weak Links: Fragile States, Global Threats, and International Security* (2011), *The Best Laid Plans: The Origins of American Multilateralism and the Dawn of the Cold War* (2009).

For all the differences between the foreign policies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, one theme that united them was the conviction that global security was only as strong as its weakest link. One year after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Bush issued his first National Security Strategy, which famously declared that “America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones.”¹ Fifteen years later, in his last State of the Union address, Obama echoed his predecessor, declaring that the United States was endangered “less by evil empires and more by failing states.”² This was nowhere more apparent than in the turbulent Middle East, which was likely to be mired in a painful, violent transition for a generation or more, providing safe haven to the Islamic State (IS) and other terrorist groups.

In the decade and a half after 9/11, this broadly shared thesis altered the U.S. national security state, shaping the doctrines, budgets, and activities of mul-

tiple agencies, including the Pentagon, State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and intelligence community. As Robert Gates, who served as secretary of defense under both Bush and Obama, explained in 2010: “Dealing with fractured or failing states is . . . the main security challenge of our time.”³

By the time Donald J. Trump was elected president in November 2016, this viewpoint had become firmly entrenched. One of Trump’s first actions in office was to ban immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries embroiled in violence, as well as to suspend refugee admissions, on the grounds that both posed grave threats to U.S. national security.⁴

At times, the U.S. government has described the dangers posed by fragile states in lurid prose, as in this statement from USAID:

When development and governance fail in a country, the consequences engulf entire regions and leap around the world. Terrorism, political violence, civil wars, organized crime, drug trafficking, infectious diseases, environmental crises, refugee flows, and mass migration cascade across the borders of weak states more destructively than ever before.⁵

Hindsight suggests that this diagnosis is too sweeping and, as such, is an uncertain guide to policy. One problem lies in the catch-all category of “weak and failing” (or “fragile”) states, which encompasses a spectrum of some fifty poorly performing countries, most in the developing world. Today, they range from corrupt but stable nations like Kenya to completely collapsed polities like Somalia, right next door. Moreover, many countries that could plausibly be called fragile—like Burundi—have little relevance to U.S. or broader global security, given their marginal connection to the most worrisome transnational threats.

But what of that subset of states mired in civil war, the subject of this volume?

Here, too, nuance is needed. Under certain circumstances, countries experiencing or recovering from violence can contribute to transnational threats of concern to the United States, including terrorism, illegal trafficking, and infectious disease. More generally, civil wars can produce other negative “spillovers.” One is regional instability. This is particularly likely to arise when internal conflicts draw in regional and even great powers.⁶ This is what occurred after Syria began to implode in 2011, helping to destabilize its immediate neighborhood.

Another common spillover is the uncontrolled flow of refugees. In 2015, great numbers of asylum seekers and migrants from Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan, and other conflict zones risked the treacherous journey across the Mediterranean, often by dinghy, testing the unity of the European Union. Closer to Syria, the same exodus placed extraordinary social, economic, and political strains on Lebanon and Jordan, where, by early 2017, Syrian refugees accounted for approximately 25 percent and 10 percent of the total national population in those countries, respectively.⁷ One lesson is that hu

The human suffering created by internal violent conflict is real, horrific, and unjust. But it is borne overwhelmingly by the unfortunate citizens of war-torn states and their immediate neighbors. A case in point is the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Between 1996 and 2008, its civil war may have taken more than five million lives and destabilized central Africa, but it had little material impact on the United States.¹⁰

It is true that the world has become interconnected in unprecedented ways. Still, many war-torn states have much in common with Vegas: what happens there often stays there.¹¹ The challenge for U.S. policy-makers is to think more clearly about the potential linkages between upheaval abroad and insecurity at home, and to consider more honestly the rationales for becoming involved in others' civil wars. The most powerful argument for intervening in internal conflicts is often moral and humanitarian, rather than interest-based and strategic.

Of the many potential spillovers from war-torn states, the one that has seized the imagination of U.S. policy-makers and independent analysts alike is the threat of transnational terrorism. The object lesson remains the searing experience of 9/11, when the Al Qaeda network, based in Afghanistan, a desperately poor country then already at war for more than two decades, orchestrated the most devastating foreign attack on U.S. territory in American history. Osama Bin Laden's ability, from his remote mountain redoubt, to grievously injure the world's most powerful nation spurred the Bush administration to reassess the main perils to U.S. national security. The result was the U.S. declaration of a "global war on terrorism"; among its core strategic goals was to deny terrorists safe havens and other benefits they obtained in the undergoverned, conflict-prone regions of the developing world.¹²

The Obama administration, despite its many ideological and substantive differenc-

es, shared its predecessor's certitude that failed, collapsed, and war-torn states played an integral, even indispensable, role for terrorist networks. This was particularly true when it came to the global *salafi* jihad, an extremist, transnational movement comprising a small minority of Sunni Muslims dedicated to (re)creating an Islamic caliphate, and of which Al Qaeda and the Islamic State are the most prominent exemplars. In 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who had previously warned of "the chaos that flows from failed states," advocated NATO intervention into Libya's civil war to prevent that country from becoming another Somalia, spawning mayhem that crested its borders.¹³

This view was reinforced by the spread of new Al Qaeda and Islamic State "franchises" in insecure, turbulent, or war-torn countries like Libya, Mali, Nigeria, and Yemen, and, of course, by the emergence of the Islamic "State" in war-torn Syria and Iraq. With bipartisan support in Congress, the Obama administration elevated the elimination of terrorist safe havens to a centerpiece of U.S. counterterrorism efforts.¹⁴ This full-spectrum approach included building the capacity of vulnerable partners (like Mali) to undertake counterterrorism operations; expanding drone strikes to assassinate suspected terrorists in "ungoverned areas" (like Pakistan's tribal belt); providing logistical support for intervention by allies (like Saudi Arabia) in civil wars in other countries (like Yemen); deploying U.S. special forces to advise friendly governments bat-

As an empirical matter, countries experiencing civil war are indeed at greater risk of experiencing terrorism.¹⁵ In principle, such war-torn states might also provide terrorists with useful assets to pursue a transnational agenda. These potential benefits could include safe havens for leadership cadres, conflict experience, pools of radicalized and/or desperate recruits, illicit revenue streams, and camps from which to plan, train for, and stage operations in other countries.¹⁶

A close look at the evidence, however, suggests that the link between war-torn states and transnational terrorism is more complicated and conditional than commonly imagined. To begin with, the vast majority of terrorist acts in such countries are perpetrated by local groups motivated by local grievances. To be sure, homegrown extremists operate in local att9

munications, banking, and transportation. Such requirements are often (though not always) lacking in war-torn states. In their thirst for profits, criminals may be drawn to a convenient geographical base and proximity to the global marketplace, even if it presents other risks. Such factors help explain why Mexico and South Africa – neither of which is a war-torn or even fragile state – have emerged as hotbeds of criminal activity and violence.³⁸

Generally speaking, criminal organizations are inherently attracted to states (or portions of states, such as Transnistria in Moldova) where institutions are weak and corrupt. But beyond that observation, the relationship between transnational criminals and the broad spectrum of fragile states is highly variable, depending on the precise governance gaps that are most useful to specific crimes, and to relevant stages (production, transit, and destination) in an often complex illicit supply chain. The connection also depends on whether criminals are able to ignore, sidestep, penetrate, or even capture the state apparatus.

Some states – like tiny Guinea-Bissau – are so weak institutionally that their territories are easily exploited by transnational criminals. A middle tier of countries are “Swiss cheese” states: they may “work” at a superficial level, but criminals deploy corruption to hollow out and capture certain state functions (like the judiciary and law enforcement) or to gain effective control over portions of the nation’s territory. The Central American countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, which have not experienced war recently but do suffer from high levels of violence, fall into this category. Large swathes of each country are in effect no-go areas for authorities, providing avenues for drug transshipment.³⁹

A third category comprises those states that are so penetrated by corruption that they have become fully functioning crim-

inal enterprises, justifying the term “Mafia state,” popularized by columnist Moisés Naim. A relevant case is Liberia, which under former strongman President Charles Taylor auctioned off elements and symbols of sovereignty – including diamond mine concessions, ship registries, and passports – to the highest bidder. But state capture is not confined to war-torn states. Several high-ranking Venezuelan officials have been officially labeled “drug kingpins” by the U.S. government. Today, the quintessential “Soprano state” may be North Korea, whose authoritarian regime keeps itself afloat by trafficking in illicit commodities from methamphetamines to weapons.⁴⁰

Finally, any claims about the connections between civil wars and transnational crime must include a disclaimer about the paucity of hard data.⁴¹ Unlike Fortune 500 corporations, criminal networks do not publish quarterly reports or boast (at least publicly) of their surging market share. Accordingly, estimates of the dimensions of illicit activities cannot be taken at face value. Many commonly cited figures, including databases maintained by reputable sources like the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, rely on self-reporting from governments, which may be tempted to lowball (or, alternatively, exaggerate) the scale of their problems. In other cases, oft-quoted numbers come from third parties, which may have an axe to grind. The world is a long way from having robust data on what Celina Realuyo of the National Defense University calls the four “Ms” of the global illicit supply chain: namely, material (what is moving and how much); manpower (who is moving it); money (how it is being financed); and mechanism (the trafficking routes and modes of transport).⁴²

Pandemic disease is an oft-cited third horseman in the war-torn state apocalypse. In this view, the weakest links in global pub-

lic health are those countries where violence has damaged or destroyed health infrastructure, leaving governments without the means to detect, respond to, and contain outbreaks of deadly diseases. At first glance, this seems a reasonable fear. To begin with, the world's most fragile states certainly shoulder a disproportionate share of the global disease burden. Moreover, noncombat mortality and morbidity consistently deteriorate both during and after war. Nor is it a coincidence that polio—to pick just one infectious disease—has resurfaced in recent years both in Syria's collapsed state and in Pakistan's volatile tribal regions.

Again, though, a bit of perspective is in order. Most war-torn states remain a side-show when it comes to the most worrisome, indeed catastrophic, threats to global public health. Since the end of the Cold War, the infectious diseases that have hit the world's failed and conflict-prone states the hardest have tended to be either endemic (such as malaria, cholera, or measles) or the long-wave pandemic of hiv/aids, which is now (after several brutal decades) finally in abeyance. By contrast, there is little correlation between patterns of state fragility and the outbreak and transmission of those infectious diseases with the greatest pandemic potential: namely, short-wave, rapid-onset respiratory infections along the lines of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (sars) and, especially, influenza.

Let us first consider the question of risk. A nation's vulnerability to infectious disease is a function not only of the state of public health infrastructure, but also of ecological, geographic, cultural, technological, and demographic variables.⁴³ Today, as Paul Wise and Michele Barry note, the main global "hotspots" for emerging infectious diseases are "areas where new or intense human activity coincides with high wildlife and microbial diversity."⁴⁴ In principle, a civil war in any of these regions would reduce state

capacities for prevention, detection, and response. But a country's performance in managing disease outbreaks is also shaped by the quality of the nation's governance, regardless of whether it is experiencing violent conflict. In the first decade of the millennium, China, Indonesia, and South Africa all failed in their responses to particular epidemics (respectively, sars, avian influenza, and hiv/aids) in part because of their regimes' lack of candor and resistance to external assistance. Finally, the hiv

The Ebola experience suggests that institutional weaknesses in war-torn states can under certain circumstances enable the spread of deadly epidemics, particularly when the multilateral system (including the World Health Organization, which performed poorly in this case) fails to lead a robust early response.⁴⁸ It also raises the question of what the international community should— or could— do were such a potential pandemic to arise in a country that was in the throes of a full-blown civil war. Such a situation would likely confront the United States and other major powers with a difficult choice: either to quarantine the affected state, at potentially terrible human cost to the nation's inhabitants, or to lead an international military (and public health) intervention, with uncertain costs to the United States itself.

The three transnational threats discussed above differ in fundamental respects, of course. Jihadist terrorism is a political activity undertaken by religiously motivated, nonstate groups that are convinced that attacks on government and civilian targets— and, in the case of IS, incitement of civil war— will hasten the arrival of a new order in the form of a caliphate consistent with their uncompromising ideology. Transnational crime is, on the other hand, an economic activity, whose profit-motivated practitioners respond to demand and supply signals in the global marketplaces.

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sive during infectious disease outbreaks— or, alternatively, where it is well-intentioned but has no capability to act on its will— the relevant threats will be more difficult to contain. Where major territories are outside of the government’s control, terrorists and criminals may find shelter within alternative governance structures provided by local tribes or insurgents, though this is by no means guaranteed.

More generally, opportunities for transnational spillovers will inevitably be shaped by the nature of the specific civil war, including its root causes, territorial range, duration, and ferocity. A sectarian conflict that resonates with religious communities in other nations, for example, is more likely to become linked with transnation

A more realistic assessment of the dangers that civil wars pose to the United States can also reorient our attention from strate

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