State Fragility as a Wicked Problem

BY KENNETH J. MENKHAUS

How we conceive of the condition of state fragility is critical to our ability to fashion effective strategies in response. To date, our efforts to define, categorize, measure, interpret, and predict state fragility have been at best partial successes. As with many important political concepts, state fragility is maddeningly difficult to pin down, all the more so because on the surface it appears to be so self-evident (and solvable) a syndrome. In reality, the notion of state fragility constitutes a complex cocktail of causes and effects, a syndrome that has proven largely impervious to quick, template-driven external solutions.

This article seeks to contribute to understanding the policy implications of state fragility by advancing three arguments. First, it argues for the utility of viewing state fragility through the lens of "wicked" and "tame" problems, a notion first developed by systems analysts. Second, it proposes that we categorize and rank-order fragile states not only by degree of fragility—though that remains an important task—but also by types of state fragility and degrees of threat they pose in order to help guide policymakers to appropriate responses. Third, it proposes closer integration of two analytic enterprises—the state-building literature and the study of political dynamics of weak states—that have generally constituted separate conversations. It argues that the most important analytic task is to determine the level of political capacity and will on the part of leaders in fragile states to address their government's fragility. Governments that are willing but not able to address their fragility constitute a tame problem amenable to conventional state-building assistance—though still a potential problem if that new-found capacity is devoted to abusive behavior against its own citizens. But governments that are unwilling to strengthen their own capacity—a seemingly counterintuitive claim but one substantiated by a growing body of research on "shadow states" and "warlord states"—are best understood as wicked problems, which will be impervious to conventional state-building assistance.

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Wicked Problems

Systems analyst Horst Rittel introduced the notion of wicked problems to describe complex planning and systems design challenges that, unlike tame problems, are not solvable.[1] The concept has subsequently been applied to other issue areas and may be an appropriate point of departure for our consideration of how to define state fragility and determine the sources of its "wickedness."

Wicked problems are said to possess the following traits:[2]

- There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem—that is, we do not understand the problem until we have developed a solution.

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- Wicked problems have no stopping rule; since there is no definitive problem, there is no definitive "solution." Problemsolving stops when resources are exhausted and when a "good enough" outcome is reached.
- Solutions to wicked problems are not true or false, but better or worse, and difficult to measure objectively because they are judged in a social context in which different stakeholders have different values and goals.
- There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem, as every wicked problem is essentially unique.
- Every solution to a wicked problem is a "one-shot operation"—that is, there is no opportunity to learn by trial and error (as Rittel observes, "You cannot build a highway to see how it works").
- Every attempt to solve a wicked problem counts significantly. "You cannot learn about the problem without trying solutions," notes Jeff Conklin, "but every attempted solution is expensive and has lasting unintended consequences which spin off new wicked problems."[3] Put another way, the policymaker "has no right to be wrong" because of the high costs of failure.
- Every wicked problem is a symptom of another problem.

Contrast this inventory with a portrait of a tame problem, which possesses a well-defined and stable problem statement; has a well-defined stopping point, where the solution has been reached; has a solution that can be objectively evaluated as right or wrong; belongs to a class of similar problems that are all solved in a similar way; offers solutions that are easily tried and abandoned; and comes with a limited set of alternative solutions.[4]

Practitioners with experience in international state-building assistance programs recognize that our organizations tend to approach state fragility as a tame problem. And yet those of us who conduct research on fragile states know that they can be, in fact, wicked. How, then, can we inject a greater appreciation for wickedness into the state fragility debate without making our analyses completely indigestible for policymaking processes and programming related to state-building?

In the case of state fragility, the problem is not only wickedness, but also ubiquitousness.

The Fund for Peace Failed States Index 2009 lists 131 of 177 states as either critical, in danger, or borderline for state failure.[5] Only a handful of states in the global south—such as Argentina, Chile, Mauritius, Oman, and Uruguay—rank as "stable." Even when more restrictive definitions are employed, leading monitoring projects typically identify from 40 to 60 failed states.[6] This reminds us that state fragility is not some exceptional circumstance. It is also not new. Over 40 years ago, Samuel Huntington opened his classic *Political Order in Changing Societies* with this thesis:

> *The most important political distinction among countries concerns not their form of government but their degree of government. The differences between democracy and dictatorship are less than the differences between those countries whose politics embodies consensus, community, legitimacy, organization, effectiveness, stability, and those countries whose politics is deficient in these qualities.*[7]

State weakness has been a problem for as long as the state itself has been evolving into a universal form of political organization. It increased with the dramatic expansion of newly independent states during the wave of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s.[8] Indeed, a compelling case can be made that it is the modern Weberian state that is the exception.[9] Conditions of state fragility have worsened in the past two decades. Yet what is new is not fragility but rather international concern over the security threat posed by failed and fragile states, especially since 9/11.

Organizing Thinking: Typologies of Fragile States

There are a number of typologies and indices to help us conceptualize and in some instances rank-order state fragility. Each has its strengths and weaknesses.

Typology by Degree of Failure

The most common approach to conceiving state fragility has been to categorize states according to their degree of fragility or failure. When state fragility was first recognized as a problem of global consequence in the early 1980s, both categorization and measurement were rudimentary. Observers eventually referred to *weak states*, *juridical sovereignty*, *failed states*, *shadow states*, and *collapsed states* to distinguish between these and more effective governments, but there were no systematic means of measuring the syndrome.

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Efforts to understand state failure more systematically—in the hope of predicting and possibly preventing it—increased with the number and cost of international peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. Offices in the United Nations (UN), defense and diplomatic ministries of member states, humanitarian aid agencies, and dozens of think tanks featured world maps populated with color-coded thumbtacks to track at-risk countries requiring close monitoring and perhaps contingency planning. Prevention of state collapse and armed conflict assumed an important role in international priorities, both as a matter of principle (the "never again" promise in the aftermath of the Rwanda genocide) and a matter of good financial stewardship, given the huge costs of state revival and peacekeeping. This heightened concern

about fragile and failed states and the threats they posed led to more rigorous empirical studies to identify the structural and precipitating causes of state failure, as well as more ambitious efforts to establish "early warning systems" (such as International Crisis Group's Crisis Watch) to monitor and report on specific countries of concern.[10]

The result is an abundance of much richer information and analysis on fragile states. One early example was the State Failure Task Force (since 2001 known as the Political Instability Task Force, or PITF) established in 1994 to assess and explain the vulnerability of states to instability and failure.[11] It has been followed by a number of other projects to measure, compare, and rank aspects of state failure, vulnerability, and performance, including the World Bank Governance Matters Project,[12] the aforementioned Fund for Peace Failed States Index, the Brookings Institution's Index of State Weakness,[13] and the Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance.[14] Many other projects are attempting to define and measure specific aspects of governance, such as Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.[15] One recent survey describes the number of these types of governance performance indices as "in the hundreds."[16]

This is not the place to engage in a comparative assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of these projects, or to consider the methodological and epistemological challenges of measuring aspects of governance and state stability; there is a small industry already devoted to this. For our purposes, it is enough to make the following observations:

- Current research defining and measuring aspects of state performance and state failure constitutes an enormous improvement over the past and, whatever its imperfections, is a valuable tool for policymakers.
- The search for the most parsimonious set of governance indicators that matter most in measuring fragility remains a work in progress, though recent research has honed in on a few particularly salient factors. For the moment, most monitoring projects err on the side of comprehensiveness of indicators, producing lengthy lists of variables that can make it difficult for policymakers to identify priority issue areas.
- There is broad consensus on the general traits of state fragility and failure—the *syndrome*—if not on the specifics of how to measure them and weigh them for relative importance. These include weak capacity to provide public security, rule of law, and basic social services; low levels of democracy and civil liberties; delegitimization and criminalization of the state; rising factionalism; poor, socially uneven, and declining economic performance; inability to manage political conflict; extensive interference by external actors; and, in some but not all cases, outbreaks of armed insurgencies.
- There is also significant similarity of findings for countries earning "warning" ratings across measurement projects focusing on state fragility, quality of governance, and conflict vulnerability. Put another way, the same set of countries tends to appear at the bottom of every ranking related to fragility, poor governance, and conflict

vulnerability despite different methodologies and measurements.

- State fragility is heavily concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa; 22 of the 28 weakest governments on the Brookings Institution's Index of State Weakness are African.
- Though the same countries tend to be flagged as fragile or failed states in every monitoring system, they vary considerably across specific indicators. Some fragile states, such as Zimbabwe, possess devastatingly poor scores across most indicators yet manage to avoid armed conflict; others, such as Chad and Iraq, enjoy a stronger overall economic performance profile yet score poorly in almost every other indicator.

Despite the advances these projects represent, a number of concerns and criticisms remain. One concern is that deterioration of fragile states—either into state failure or armed conflict or both—has remained difficult to predict. Many states are vulnerable, the data show, but only some actually slip into serious levels of instability. Recent research suggests that "highly factionalized partial democracies" are most susceptible,[17] but precipitating causes are highly situational and context specific. A second concern is that the main findings of this body of research—that many to most states are at risk—may well be true but provide no means of ordering priorities for policymakers and diplomats. The findings are to some extent overwhelming given the enormity of the problem and the limited resources available to respond. In sum, these tools need to be supplemented with a means of ordering fragile states by the degree of strategic, political, or humanitarian impact they would have were they to fail—an alternative ordering discussed below.

Typology by Type of State Failure

"All stable nations resemble one another; each unstable nation is unstable in its own way," note Jack Goldstone and others in their seminal PITF study of 2005.[18] Variations in the type of state fragility and failure are important, as they pose different threats both to their own people and to the international community. In the inventory below, these proposed types of state failure are not mutually exclusive—states can exhibit several of these features in a variety of combinations. This list is by no means exhaustive but is meant only as a point of departure for discussion. Importantly, a number of categories draw on political research that points to a broader observation often overlooked in state-building initiatives—that the government can sometimes be an active part of the crisis and that state fragility may be seen by key local leaders as an acceptable or even optimal solution, not a problem to be solved.

Complete or Near-complete State Collapse. Cases of complete state collapse are rare and to date have usually been temporary. Somalia stands as the most dramatic and prolonged example, having gone without a functioning central government since 1991; Lebanon, Sierra Leone, and Afghanistan are examples of shorter term state collapse. Near-complete cases of state collapse—"paper governments" that enjoy a legal existence as a

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sovereign authority but that control only a portion of the capital city and are entirely dysfunctional as an administration—are a variation on this theme.[19] Haiti has at times met this definition; the Transitional Federal Government in Somalia today does as well.

Hinterland Failure. Some weak governments exercise adequate control over their capital and other valuable or strategic areas of the country but lack either the will or the capacity to project their authority into peripheral parts of the country. This can often mean a third or more of the countryside is beyond the de facto control of the government, which is present in the lives of those citizens only as a "garrison state" occasionally patrolling remote districts. Responsibility for day-to-day governance typically falls on the local communities, often relying on customary law or other hybrid governance arrangements. In some cases, peripheral zones come under the control of criminal or insurgency elements; the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, which has at times controlled a fifth of the territory of that country, is a case in point. Because peripheries are often in border areas, this increases problems of cross-border smuggling and spillover violence. In some cases, states are simply too weak to project authority into their remote peripheries, but this is often due to lack of political will. As Jeff Herbst has persuasively argued, it is economically rational for state authorities, who enjoy juridical sovereignty over territory within their borders whether or not they "earn it" through governing, to avoid the high cost of projecting the state into thinly populated, expansive, uneconomic regions in their peripheries.[20] Only when those burning peripheries create security problems or cause political embarrassment to the government—or when economic assets such as oil are discovered—does this calculation change and the government begin to exercise authority in its peripheries. Kenya's recent efforts to improve its governance and security presence in its remote northern and northeastern border areas have been driven in part by the embarrassment caused by deadly communal violence there and rising security threats posed by spillover from Somalia.

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Nocturnal Anarchy. Some fragile states manage to impose a modicum of law and order during the day but are beset by serious criminal violence at night, at which point citizens must rely on their own systems of protection. The police either are unable to stop better armed criminals or are part of the criminality. The expansive slums of third world cities are, in this setting, beyond the reach of the state. Robert Kaplan's article "The Coming Anarchy" in 1994 vividly depicted this type of state failure, pointing to the slums of West Africa's cities as examples.[21]

Deinstitutionalized State. Governments intentionally gutted of institutional capacity to govern by the top leadership constitute another form of failed or fragile state. As William Reno has argued, leaders whose principal preoccupation is regime survival can come to view a well-functioning ministry as a potential power base for a rival, and hence go to considerable lengths to undermine and weaken governmental departments and branches.[22] The judiciary is often singled out in this regard, and as a result is often far from autonomous and competent in fragile states.

State within a State. In many instances, states fail because autonomous political and security forces operate within the state structure and become a law unto themselves. This is most common with security forces, which can become deeply involved in lucrative criminal activities and predatory activities against parts or all of the civilian population.

Warlord or Criminal State. When a major criminal operation or armed conflict is waged for economic gain and is sanctioned at the highest levels of the government, the state itself can be said to be a criminal or warlord state.[23] Literature on "new wars" suggests that state complicity in the perpetuation of war in pursuit of parochial economic interests feeding off of plunder and resource diversion is not rare.[24] One of the most egregious examples of such a warlord state was Liberia under Charles Taylor, who was eventually arrested for war crimes committed in Sierra Leone.

Delegitimized State. Some governments earn the status of fragile state by losing or failing to earn legitimacy among most or all of the population. This most commonly results from failure to provide basic security and core social services expected by the people (that is, "performance legitimacy"), but can also be due to patently fixed elections, failure to hold elections, gross corruption, and high levels of repression and human rights abuse. Once legitimacy is lost, the social contract that ties people to the state is eroded, and the state risks losing the allegiance of its citizens to other political actors.[25] Loss of legitimacy does not automatically produce armed insurgencies (as Zimbabwe demonstrates) or even protests. Faced with the choice of "loyalty, exit, or voice," some may choose "exit" and simply recede from the grip of the indifferent state, creating alternative local systems of governance and security.[26]

Financially Collapsed State. The root of some instances of state fragility is financial weakness. There are many variations on this theme:

- states that suffer catastrophic external economic shocks depriving them of much of their tax revenue base (including the current economic recession)
- states that are systematically looted by kleptocratic leaders
- states that have been progressively weakened over time by onerous debt servicing
- states that are weakened in their ability to provide basic services by structural adjustment conditionality
- states that were dependent on foreign aid that then was reduced or suspended.

Some of these conditions have involved deeply impoverished states that have never been viable without extensive external support. Even a modest state structure in such instances involves levels of funding that local economies cannot shoulder. These are not so much fragile states as castles built on sand, vulnerable to rapid collapse if their foreign aid is interrupted. The question of economic viability of some of the poorest fragile states is a sensitive but increasingly unavoidable topic.

Besieged State. Fragile and failed states are often confronted by one or more armed insurgencies, which can either be the result of other aspects of state fragility or the main cause of that condition. Some observers presume that armed insurgency is a defining feature of a failed state while others do not.[27] What is uncontested is that state failure correlates closely with the occurrence of armed conflict. An important but sometimes overlooked aspect of armed violence in fragile states is the condition of chronic

insecurity in which armed conflict blurs with armed criminality, and uncontrolled militias become indistinguishable from criminal gangs. This condition of "not war not peace" can be invisible to outsiders, who focus on warfare between insurgencies and the state; but for civilian populations—the main victims of these new wars—the condition is very real.

Mediated State. Fragile states "willing but not able" to govern sometimes reach negotiated understandings with existing nonstate authorities at the local level in what has been called a hybrid or mediated state arrangement.[28] These arrangements can be formal—as with South Sudan's constitutional delegation of local level authority to *Bomas*, or local chieftain councils—but are more often informal partnerships, as in northern Kenya between the government and local peace and development committees composed of civic and traditional figures.[29] This "outsourcing" of key sovereign functions of the state to nonstate actors can be problematic, raising questions of constitutional authority, due process, accountability, and basic human rights. But it can also be an effective means of tapping into existing, legitimate, local authority, at least as a temporary measure while a fragile state is being strengthened. This practice is not to be confused with colonial policies of "indirect rule" in that the fragile state is *negotiating*, not imposing, an arrangement with local authorities. This type of fragile state is far more common than is often appreciated and has even been considered an option by U.S. Government officials in Afghanistan as a means of tapping into customary law to indirectly extend the state's weak judicial system into the countryside.[30]

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Transitional States. Fragile states can be vulnerable to armed conflict or afflicted by active armed conflict or postconflict. In the latter case, most contemporary civil wars have been ended via negotiated settlement, typically framed by a powersharing agreement and the establishment of a transitional government. This new phenomenon has produced several dozen transitional governments in the past 20 years. Transitional governments are a particular type of political system, arguably an entirely new category of state that the field of comparative politics is only slowly coming to treat as such.[31] Transitional states are by definition fragile, both in capacity and ability to maintain a unity coalition. They are also burdened with executing some of the most politically charged decisions imaginable—"key transitional tasks" in the literature. The crafting of a constitution, establishment of regional or district borders, resolution of outstanding conflicts, and holding of elections are monumental tasks that can act as dry kindling for renewed outbreak of violence and renewed state failure. Paul Collier's finding that "the single greatest predictor of a civil war is a previous civil war" is especially relevant for transitional governments.[32]

Typology by Threat Potential

The generic threats posed by weak and failed states are well known and have been repeated in innumerable think tank reports and government strategy documents. But the famous observation in the 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy that "America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones" does not help us order the

magnitude of different threats posed by 50 or more fragile states.[33]

Each of these types of state fragility poses a different kind of threat to its own population, regional neighbors, and the world. Breaking fragile states into categories helps us rank them not by their degree of fragility but by the impact their fragility has on U.S. interests and the impact their deterioration would have. This exercise is done on the assumption that U.S. resources are limited and that, given the large number of fragile states, some degree of "triage" is unavoidable. But it is also done in the knowledge that while the strategic impact of a state's failure can be measured with some degree of confidence, the political impact of a failed state cannot. We need only look back 20 years to see that imploding states that at the time appeared to have little strategic consequence for the United States and the world—Somalia, Rwanda, Haiti, East Timor, and Darfur, Sudan, to name a few—took on political lives of their own, consuming far more time and treasure than anyone would have predicted. The United States has to consider the domestic political costs of state failure as well as strategic costs. Unfortunately, recent history has demonstrated that when the stakes are political, not strategic, the policy response is likely driven by political rather than strategic calculations. In that instance, policies appearing to be "doing something" about a crisis are often privileged over actually solving it.

The inventory below summarizes the most commonly cited threats or costs emanating from failed states, beginning with terrorist threats they may pose and concluding with the wide range of other threats. Their actual prioritization is highly context-specific.

Takeover by a Radical Movement of a Failed State with Nuclear Weapons or Critical Economic Assets. A small number of fragile states are simultaneously nuclear powers or play a sensitive role in the global economy. If such a state were to fall to a radical movement that has a nihilistic or other ideological conviction that could justify use of nuclear weapons or suspension of the country's economic role, the results could be catastrophic. This worst-case scenario has been a matter of concern with regard to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, among others.

Terrorist Base. Fear that failed states will provide al Qaeda and other terrorist groups with "ungoverned space" to exploit as a base has been a bedrock concern since 9/11. To date, al Qaeda has used parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan as its base. Both are failed but not entirely collapsed states. The group's only other base was Sudan from 1991 to 1996, where it was the guest of the government. Al Qaeda cells operate in a wide range of countries, from Kenya to Yemen to the Philippines to Indonesia. Available evidence suggests that terrorist groups prefer to locate not in completely collapsed states such as Somalia, which are nonpermissive environments for all outside actors, but rather in weak states with governments that have corrupt and/or easily penetrated security sector forces and leaders who lack the capacity or will to launch a crackdown. In some instances weak, rogue regimes actively collude with the terrorist group (such as Sudan in 1991–1996).

Terrorist Safe Haven. A related concern is use of failed states as safe havens, where al Qaeda and other terrorists can hide undetected. They are not looking to exploit a failed state as a base of operations in this instance but only to stay off the radar screen. Any state with weak police capacity and low levels of community policing—typically where governments have low legitimacy—can be used for this purpose. Large multiethnic cities with high numbers of foreign travelers and residents and expansive

slums are attractive sites. Zones of complete state collapse are only viable as safe havens if a strong and reliable local ally is able to offer protection, as is currently the case with the radical insurgency Al-Shabaab in Somalia.

Terrorist Target. Fragile states with weak policing capacity but a rich collection of soft targets—international hotels, embassies, shopping malls, and so forth—constitute a particularly worrisome subcategory. Also at risk are states with critical economic assets such as oil refineries, pipelines, or seaports that if damaged or destroyed would have a major impact on the world economy.

Terrorist Financing. Weak states featuring high levels of corruption, weak policing, low capacity for monitoring business activities and trade, and valuable commercial opportunities (ranging from drug trafficking to diamond smuggling to more mundane businesses) are ideal for terrorist profit-generating, particularly if informal money transfer systems and money laundering opportunities exist.

Terrorist Recruiting. The record of recruitment into al Qaeda demonstrates that fragile states' poverty and unemployment are not a catalyst for terrorist recruitment per se. The movement generally does better attracting disaffected and radicalized middle class students and professionals. Instead, it is predatory or repressive police states that have deeply alienated groups that are prime targets. Pakistan, Egypt, and Morocco are fragile states that have been rich recruiting grounds. Fragile states with weak security forces, in which ethnic or religious communities feel shut out from political life and treated as second-class citizens, have also been solid recruiting grounds.

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Transitional Criminal Base. The conditions that are conducive for terrorist financing are attractive for transnational criminal elements, which thrive where they can pay off or infiltrate weak, corrupt governments and exploit poorly patrolled coastlines. Guinea-Bissau is a frequently cited example of a "narco-state" in which profits from drug smuggling from Latin America to Europe dwarf government tax revenues and in which top government officials are implicated.

Spillover Threats. Spillover of a plethora of crises from failed states into vulnerable neighbors became a concern as early as 1991 when Liberia's collapse and warlordism led directly to the catastrophic failure of the state in Sierra Leone. The spillover of political violence from the genocide in Rwanda into the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1998 is unquestionably the most costly example if measured in human lives; and spillover of armed conflict and instability from Darfur into Central African Republic and Chad is the most recent example. All of these cases involve clusters of adjacent weak states and poorly controlled border areas. They reinforce fears that individual cases of state failure can quickly become regional crises and highlight the fact that fragile states have much less resilience to cope with troubles coming across their borders.

Humanitarian Crisis. The humanitarian costs of state failure, especially when accompanied by armed conflict and displacement, are well known. These costs are borne mainly by the local population and in locations such as the Congo, Sudan, and Rwanda have reached horrific levels. In terms of impact on U.S. interests, every administration since George H.W.

Bush has found itself under profound political pressure to take action that is politically risky and time-consuming to respond to humanitarian crises, from Operation *Provide Comfort* in northern Iraq in 1991 to the ongoing crisis in Darfur. When public pressure to do something is strong and the subsequent humanitarian interventions go wrong—the most dramatic example being the Somalia intervention in 1993—the political costs can be astronomical.

Refugee Flows. Fragile states that fall into protracted armed conflict almost always produce large refugee flows that pose considerable burdens on neighboring states and that can become onerous political problems for third countries (mainly in the West) where refugees subsequently resettle in large numbers, legally or illegally. The political backlash against the influx of refugee/immigrant communities in some European countries has become a significant driver of European policy toward failed states.

Health Threats. Fragile states that have little or no capacity to operate public health systems and that possess large numbers of displaced persons crowded into unsanitary camps are petri dishes for the spread of virulent new strains of diseases that can go undetected until they spread to uncontrollable levels. The Ebola virus scares emanating out of northern Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo were a case in point.

Environmental Threats. Fragile states with high levels of corruption and/or a weak capacity to police their territories and coasts are vulnerable to toxic dumping, as recent stories from the Ivory Coast have demonstrated. Weak states also lack the ability to regulate harvesting of valuable rainforests and poaching of endangered species.

Piracy Threats. Piracy thrives off the coast of weak and/or corrupt states that lack the capacity or will to stop pirates. The epidemic of piracy off the lawless coast of Somalia since 2005 is the most dramatic example; it has imposed costs on shipping companies and their crews and has required the deployment of international naval patrols from two dozen countries.

Costs of Peacekeeping Operations. Failed states requiring international peacekeeping forces are financially costly. The total annual UN peacekeeping budget for 2008–2009 reached $7.1 billion. This is only a tiny fraction of total military expenditures worldwide, but is sometimes cited by UN member states as a concern.

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Typology by State Willingness and Capacity

Identifying at-risk fragile states is a critical first step, classifying them by type of fragile state situation is a second, and assessing the type of threat they pose is a third. The next step is shaping strategies tailored to specific contexts. Here the critical distinction must be made between the willingness and capacity of fragile states to address their own weakness and the threats emanating from that weakness. This task draws on the findings of a growing body of academic research on war economies and the political economy of weak, deinstitutionalized states.

Willing but Not Able. The most permissive environment for external state-building occurs when a government is willing but not able to address problems associated with its own fragility. Seen through the prism of the wicked

United Nations Stabilization Mission members work in Haiti, which has periodically met definition of state in near-complete collapse

UN (Logan Abassi)

problem literature, a fragile state that has leaders willing but not able to fix the state's weakness comes close to being a tame, solvable problem. In this case, capacity-building measures—especially those designed to strengthen the military, police, civil service, judicial system, and executive branch leadership—are both appropriate and likely to bear fruit.

But it is critical in that instance to understand accurately the source of the government's fragility. Capacity-building aid to a "willing but not able" government that possesses an extremely weak economy risks reinforcing rather than resolving its fragility, if in the process a state structure is built that cannot be sustained except through greater dependence on foreign assistance. It is also imperative to have a clear answer to the question, "Willing *to do what*?" If the answer is to provide more effective public security, rule of law, and basic services to its citizens, then straightforward capacity-building programs are appropriate. If the government is willing to use improved capacity to monitor and prevent criminal and terrorist activities within its borders, but also intends to put that greater security capacity to use against its domestic rivals, then capacity-building must be tempered with strengthening checks and balances and democratic constraints on the government.

Calls to strengthen the capacity of fragile states must always be attuned to the dual use of security sector power. A state with a more robust security sector that uses it against its internal rivals has not been strengthened; it has simply been changed from one type of fragile state to another. This is at the heart of the tension between democratization programs and capacity-building programs in fragile states. The two need not be at odds and ideally are complementary, but in practice balancing them is not easy.

Able but Unwilling. Leaders of fragile states who are able but not willing to address their fragility are more of a wicked problem. There are many variations on this theme. Some governments possess impressive levels of income (typically new oil revenues, as in Equatorial Guinea) that could be used to extend government services and improve public security, but political elites are focused solely on pocketing those revenues.

In other cases, governments possess impressive levels of administrative and security sector capacity despite extreme poverty but use that capacity to repress the population, in the process rendering the country more, not less, susceptible to political instability. Eritrea is one of many examples. These cases require greater levels of aid designed to promote accountability and democracy but are the very sites where governments are least likely to welcome such assistance. Simply providing aid to improve capacity in this type of state is likely only to exacerbate the source of its fragility, and risks making donors complicit in human rights abuses in the process.

A third variation of this type of government is the predatory or warlord state, which is not only repressive but actively complicit in fomenting armed conflict among and exploitation of its citizens. Sudan's indicted leadership is an example.

Unable and Unwilling. Governments that are both very weak and venal are a third category. These are governments that focus almost exclusively on regime survival and that, though poor, are content to feed off of the still-impressive financial benefits accruing to those who claim juridical control of a state, however failed it may be. The costs of state-building are too high, and the risks too great. By contrast, state failure is a condition that the leadership can live with and knows best. Indeed, to the extent that state failure is a bigger concern to outsiders than to the government, it can use its condition of failure as a lure for state-building assistance, which it then pockets for private gain. The recent acquisition by the Somali Transitional Federal Government of tens of millions of dollars in weapons and ammunition from the United States, much of which was subsequently sold on the open market (presumably making its way to Al-Shabaab), is illustrative and reminds us that for some governments, state failure is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be exploited.

Both types of "unwilling" fragile government pose wicked problems for external actors, and can easily lead to interventions that violate the "do no harm" precept. For instance, strategies seeking to build on "clusters of competence" within a fragile state may actually result in the political targeting of the targeted group if the regime in question pursues its own goals of political survivalism via a policy of deinstitutionalization as William Reno describes in *Warlord Politics and African States*. What the outside world sees as a potential building block for state-building—a cluster of competence—the regime sees as a potential rival and threat, and quickly moves to excise it from the state.

what the outside world sees as a potential building block for state-building the regime sees as a potential rival

Conceiving of fragile states as either tame or wicked problems, based on close political analysis of the interests of the elites in control of the state, has several virtues. First, it reminds us to approach the willingness and capacity of the leadership of weak states as an

empirical question to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, not as an assumption on which to base template-driven state-building policy. This observation forms part of a broader plea, articulated most recently by Mats Berdal, that context is critical and must be better understood by external actors seeking to promote state-building or postconflict assistance.[34] Second, by highlighting the distinction between tame and wicked state-building challenges, more appropriate policies can be crafted that stand a better chance of success. Put more directly, state-building policies designed for tame cases of state failure but applied in wicked cases are destined to fail and possibly to make things worse. Basing policies on early assessment of the wickedness of a state failure may help prevent this.

Analytically, the notion of state-building as a wicked problem is a stark reminder that our presumption that state failure is a crisis to be solved may not be shared by key local actors. Just as we have come to learn that semi-democratization and protracted conflict are conditions that local elites may actively seek to promote and perpetuate, so too can the problem of state failure constitute a desired—or at least a "good enough"—outcome for some leaders of failed states. This may be an increasingly commonplace observation among political analysts, but it is not often incorporated into state-building templates, which almost always operate on the assumption that the leaders of failed states are committed to building the capacity of their governments.

If this line of reasoning about state fragility has merit, it opens the door to a range of questions requiring further research. The first is analytic. How does one measure and assess levels of political willingness to address state failure? Must lack of political will to address state failure be viewed as an either-or condition (mirrored in the dichotomy of tame versus wicked problems), or is it in fact a much more complex syndrome of mixed motives on the part of internally divided actors within the government?

The second is prescriptive. It is easy to recommend not applying standard state-building programs in instances where state failure is a wicked problem. But what *can* be done in cases where state failure is wicked rather than tame? What can the international community do when a state's condition of failure poses serious threats to its own population and to the wider world, but its leadership is indifferent or complicit? The international community has made significant advances on a related question—the rights and responsibilities of external actors when governments are unwilling to protect their own citizens from genocide, ethnic cleansing, or gross violations of human rights. The extensive debate and discussions that surrounded the formulation of the "responsibility to protect" doctrine may be required to generate useful policy recommendations for managing instances of "willful state failure." For the moment, our toolbox for responding to wicked state failure is limited. We can cajole, encourage, and shame the leaders in question; attempt to reshape the interests of political elites through the usual array of carrots and sticks; work around them by searching for "clusters of competence" on which to build within the weak government; or, as has occurred in several places, work to replace incorrigible leaders in the hope that the replacement leadership will exhibit a greater commitment to state-building. These tools have to date had limited success, from Congo to Somalia to Afghanistan. New tools and new doctrine to deal with the specific problem of willful state failure is an important, politically sensitive, and essential task if the toughest, most wicked cases of state failure are to be addressed. **PRISM**

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Notes

[1] Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973), 155–159.

[2] A number of publications have sought to define and summarize wicked problems, building on Rittel's original idea. This is an amalgam of several sources.

[3] Jeff Conklin, *Dialogue Mapping: Building Shared Understanding of Wicked Problems* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005), 7.

[4] Ibid., 9.

[5] See Fund for Peace at <www.fundforpeace.org/web/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=391&Itemid=549>; for an interactive map of these data, see *Foreign Policy* at <www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/06/22/2009_failed_states_index_interactive_map_and_rankings>.

[6] Stewart Patrick, "U.S. Policy Towards Fragile States: An Integrated Approach to Security and Development," in *The White House and the World*, ed. Nancy Birdsall (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2008), 329, available at <www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/16560>.

[7] Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 1.

[8] It is worth noting, however, that the "newness" of states correlates only partially with state fragility. Many of the original 51 member states of the United Nations in 1945 rank among the most fragile states in the world; some have broken up. The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia no longer exist; Ethiopia, Czechoslovakia, and India were among those that lost a portion of territory to secessionists; and Haiti, Lebanon, Colombia, El Salvador, Iraq, Honduras, and Guatemala are among the many original member states that at some point have suffered prolonged crises of internal war and state failure.

[9] Alex de Waal, "Protecting Civilians in Fragile States," presentation to Oxfam-Novib, The Hague, September 21, 2009.

[10] Crisis Group's Crisis Watch is available at <www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm>.

[11] Political Instability Task Force, George Mason University, available at <http://globalpolicy.gmu.edu/pitf/index.htm>.

[12] World Bank, "Governance Matters, Worldwide Governance Indicators," available at <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.asp>.

[13] Brookings Institution, "Index of State Weakness," available at <www.brookings.edu/reports/2008/02_weak_states_index.aspx>.

[14] Mo Ibrahim Foundation, "Index of African Governance," available at <www.moibrahimfoundation.org/en/section/the-ibrahim-index>.

[15] Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index," available at <www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi>.

[16] Christiane Arndt and Charles Oman, "Uses and Abuses of Governance Indicators," Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Development Center, 2006. Another useful review of different

indices of state fragility is the German Development Institute (DIE) and UN Development Programme, "Users' Guide on Measuring Fragility" (Bonn: DIE, 2009).

[17] Jack A. Goldstone et al., "A Global Forecasting Model of Political Instability," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC, September 1–4, 2005.

[18] Ibid., 11.

[19] Robert I. Rotberg, "Failed States, Collapsed States, Weak States: Causes and Indicators," in *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 9–10.

[20] Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[21] Robert D. Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *The Atlantic* (February 1994).

[22] William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

[23] Jean-Francois Bayart, Stephen Ellis, and Beatrice Hibou, *The Criminalization of the State in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey Press, 1997).

[24] Mats Berdal and David Malone, eds., *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

[25] Rotberg, 9.

[26] Albert Hirschman, *Exit, Loyalty, and Voice: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

[27] Rotberg, for instance, argues that "failed states are tense, deeply conflicted, dangerous, and contested bitterly by warring factions. . . . It is not the absolute intensity of violence that identifies a failed state. Rather it is the enduring character of that violence." See "The Failure and Collapse of Nation-States," in *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5. But most of the systems monitoring state fragility and weakness rank Zimbabwe at or near the top of the list of failed states (for 2009) despite the fact that it suffers from no armed insurgency.

[28] Louise Andersen, Bjørn Møller, and Finn Stepputat, eds., *Fragile States and Insecure People? Violence, Security, and Statehood in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave, 2007).

[29] Kenneth J. Menkhaus, "The Rise of a Mediated State in Northern Kenya: The Wajir Story and Its Implications for Statebuilding," *Afrika Focus* [Ghent] 21, no. 2 (2008), 23–38.

[30] Thomas Barfield, Neamat Nojumi, and J. Alexander Thier, "The Clash of Two Goods: State and Non-State Dispute Resolution in Afghanistan," U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, 2006.

[31] Karen Guttieri and Jessica Piombo, eds., *Transitional Governments: Institutional Bridges to Peace and Democracy?* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2007).

[32] Paul Collier et al., *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2003).

[33] *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, September 2002), part I, "Overview of America's International Strategy," available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/nss1.html>.

[34] Mats Berdal, *Building Peace after War*, Adelphi Paper no. 407 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2009), 41.