

# THE MYTH OF 'UNGOVERNED SPACE' – SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR EXOGENOUS STATE-BUILDING AND HUMAN SECURITY

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Heightened anxiety in the West about 'ungoverned territories' was a direct consequence of the events of 9/11. The analysis and dominant policy prescriptions proposed for dealing with them, however, can be traced back to the 'state failure' debates of the 1990s, when many Western analysts and policymakers came to view the 'building' of modern liberal states along Weberian lines as *the* solution to the scourge of civil war in the post-Cold War era. In fact, while the underlying motives for engaging with 'failed states' in the 1990s and 'ungoverned space' after 2001 may have differed, the *diagnosis* of the core challenge that needed to be addressed rested on fundamentally similar assumptions.

The notions of 'state failure' and 'ungoverned space' both reflect, whether implicitly or explicitly, what may be crudely summarised as the Weberian conception of the state, of the legal-rational bases of legitimate authority and of the proper source of political order. Central to this is the understanding of the state as a geographically circumscribed entity within which, through a set of formal institutions, it asserts a monopoly of governance, rule-making and the legitimate use of violence. With these powers, the state generates *legitimacy* through the provision of public goods, foremost among them

protection and security. Where these conditions are critically weakened legitimacy seeps away, political order disintegrates and states may, in extremis, 'collapse', leaving behind 'ungoverned territories'. Exogenous state-building may be viewed as an attempt by outsiders to reconstitute states in order to prevent the descent into 'ungovernability', or, more positively (as in the discourse of the 1990s), help lay the foundations for lasting peace and human security. Either way, state-building thus conceived rests on a mechanical, technocratic understanding of state failure. Its aim, borrowing the words of a well-known English nursery rhyme, becomes to 'put Humpty Dumpty back together again'.

While superficially compelling, the actual experience of 'post-conflict' peace- and state-building over the past three decades has brought the *limits* of such an approach into sharp relief. Specifically, the experience has shown that the simple yet evocative notion of 'ungoverned space' is in fact profoundly unhelpful, analytically as well as empirically. In reality, what Western policymakers have routinely described as 'ungoverned spaces' – whether in Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, or along the Venezuelan-Colombian

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Venezuelans cross the Puente Internacional Simón Bolívar, the busiest border point connecting Venezuela and Colombia.  
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border – are *not* devoid of governance, even though they are located in areas where the reach and authority of central government are weak and fragmented.

While invariably destructive, war also transforms social, economic and political bases of power within society, resulting in the emergence of alternative political and economic orders. This is one reason why the idea that states subjected to war and violence simply collapse into ‘chaos’ or ‘ungoverned space’ conceals a much more complex reality. As ethnographic and other studies of conflict zones have repeatedly shown, those who live in conditions of persistent insecurity and endemic violence where *formal* state institutions are weak or non-existent are never indifferent to the circumstances in which they find themselves. Politico-military elites and power brokers, economic interest groups and civil society actors, ‘ordinary’ people preoccupied with survival: *all* of them find ways of adapting to the realities created by war and persistent state weakness.

Strategies of adjustment can be predatory in nature, geared towards personal enrichment through the capturing of criminal rent and/or the exploitation of vulnerable civilian populations. Strategies of adjustment can also, however, be less about predation than about taking the necessary steps required to survive and cope in a world where the state no longer provides security, effective rule or basic life-sustaining services. Indeed, the response of local communities to such circumstances has often been to create informal arrangements that eventually have crystallised into what Ken Menkhous has described as systems of ‘governance without government’. As *observed* by René Lemarchand of Eastern Congo, such systems may provide the basis for more durable political settlements. Still, while sometimes lauded as ‘organic’, ‘bottom-up’ and ‘authentic’ processes, alternative systems of governance should not automatically and everywhere be treated as the most promising basis for addressing human security needs; as indicated above, local adaptations to state failure and insecurity can also be, and have often proved to be, exploitative, violent and illiberal. More often than not, the calculations and motives of local actors are likely to be complex and varied, reflecting their particular circumstances and thus resisting simple characterisations – a reality that emerges clearly from studies of the war in *Afghanistan* as viewed from the perspective of local Afghans.

The key point here – and also a key lesson for policymakers – is that violent conflict and state weakness, rather than being viewed merely as anarchic and ‘chaotic’, must be understood as a distinctive political economy of war and peace; one given by the range of interests and the functional utility that some see in their perpetuation. In other words, what must be analysed are the alternative systems of power, influence and economic activity that crystallise within conflict zones, and, more specifically, the interaction of local war economies with the political agendas of conflict actors. This is no easy task, not least because political economies mutate, often rapidly, in response to external and internal stimuli, but policymakers wishing to assist in

creating conditions that stand a chance of enhancing human security in conflict zones have no other option. The value of political economy analyses, as Suhrke, Goodhand and Bose *observe*, is that it helps to ‘deconstruct and denaturalise the idea of the Weberian state, blurring the binary distinctions between state and non-state, legitimate and illegitimate, and highlighting the networks, coalitions and material foundations that underpin or undermine the state’. Even if such analysis does not provide clear-cut answers in terms of how best, if at all, to intervene, it directs decision-makers towards the *kinds* of questions that must nonetheless be asked. These include: Where does *real* power – that is, networks of privilege and patronage that have evolved during conflict – lie in ‘post-conflict’ states? Which informal practices and actors can be formalised without threat to overall long-term political stability? What is the risk that exogenous state-building initiatives will, rather than securing improvements in human security, merely entrench the power and influence of actors with a vested interest in weak states and instability?

Peace- and state-building processes should never be viewed primarily as a matter of institutional capacity narrowly conceived. The deeper challenge lies in finding and effectively supporting a political settlement that takes account of the formal as well as the informal distribution of power, influence and resources within society. The notion of ‘political settlement’ here should not be

confused with the formal signing of a peace accord – even though such accords ideally should and, on occasion, have been underpinned by less formal understandings of the rules forged among social groups and elites. Reaching a political settlement means reaching an agreement on those ‘rules’, and making the

search for such a settlement more central to the activities of external actors engaged in state- and peace-building means shifting focus away from institutional capacity as such to consider the underlying structures of power and influence in society. This, in turn, necessarily entails a broader conception of the ‘state’ to include informal actors and networks that have prospered in the course of conflict and have sometimes benefited from persistent state weakness. This is essential because a functioning and inclusive political settlement – one in which key actors see themselves as having a long-term stake – rather than just state capacity is necessary for building legitimacy across society for any new ‘post-conflict’ dispensation.

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