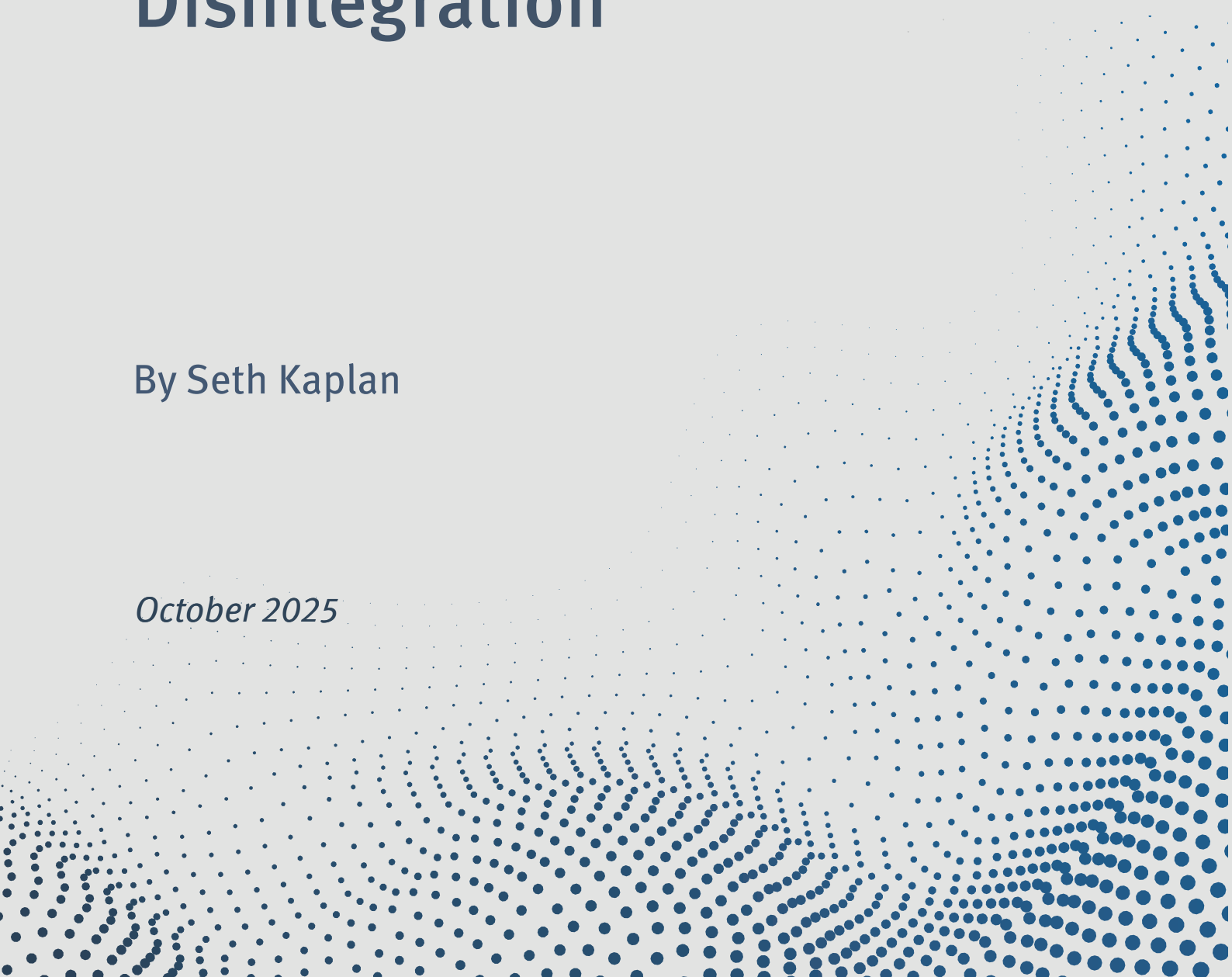




Piecemeal Transitions in an Age of State Disintegration

By Seth Kaplan

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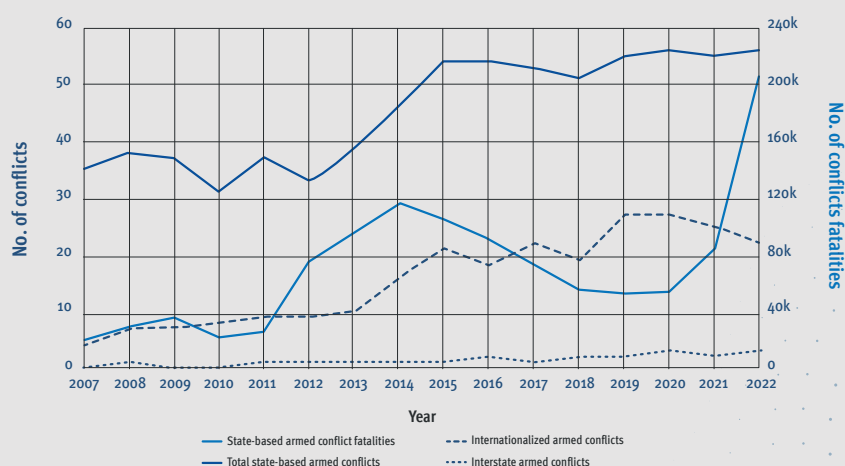
Introduction

The world is undergoing a profound transformation as the balance of power between non-state and state actors shifts visibly and dramatically in favour of the former. States—and societies—have become more fragmented, making the maintenance and restoration of stability harder and requiring more creativity than in the past. Yet, multi-lateral organisations, diplomats, and policymakers working to advance transitions and promote peace in fragile and conflict-affected states such as Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, Haiti, and the DRC have tended to view this shift as an aberration rather than a structural change.

The basic premise that drives current efforts—that states can be put back together again with some international involvement—is misplaced. Central governments in many fragile states are simply not robust enough to exercise authority over the militias, ethnic groups, criminal gangs, terrorists, warlords, and outside actors who increasingly compete for control of their territories no matter how much international aid the central governments receive, what election is held, or in what way negotiations are advanced. Even when not directly challenged, such states rarely extend their rubric over most of their territory.

In the face of mounting evidence (see figure 1), we must be willing to accept that there are only partial and hybrid solutions for the foreseeable future. Above all, a much more vigorous attempt to work from the bottom up is needed, as local governance and conflict management mechanisms are often these states' most effective political assets. A limited agreement or set of agreements between a small number of the most powerful local actors that incrementally improves conditions, reduce tensions, or create islands of stability will often have a better chance of success than anything comprehensive. Though painful to admit, it is only in this way that the most fragile and conflict-affected places can likely return to anything like stability given current global political-technological circumstances.

Figure 1: Incidence and Impact of state-based armed conflict, 2007-22¹



1. <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2024/in-full/global-risks-2024-at-a-turning-point/>

Part 1: Four Trends Reshaping the Context for Weak States

Although some countries are more vulnerable than others, most fragile states have been able to maintain “good enough” stability for extended periods since independence. Bouts of instability may have occurred, but governments at least kept the peace and delivered basic public services (albeit of mixed quality). With power concentrated at the centre, the government typically had by far the strongest coercive force and a near-monopoly on media and communications. No matter how weak, their opponents were generally weaker (think Syria before 2011 or the DRC under Mobuto).

Yes, several recent trends have changed the balance of forces, making the more fragile states less sustainable in their current form, and more likely to tip over into instability than before. Four specific trends stand out, one each having to do with technology, weapons proliferation, ideology, and the larger structure of global power distribution.

New communications technology is empowering non-state actors and weakening national cohesion. Whereas once the state had a quasi-monopoly on media and communications, now it controls neither. The proliferation of cell phones, smartphones, new television channels, the Internet, and social media has weakened the legitimacy of many governments while exacerbating societal fragmentation along ideological or identity lines. Different narratives about the past, present, and future now compete on a new scale with what the government says; and different allegiances—some subnational, others supranational—now vie on a new scale with loyalty to country.

On top of this, individuals have more power to criticise ineffective governments, but weak institutions have rarely become more effective as a result. Likewise, groups have far greater capacity to organise around a common cause and challenge authority; whereas before they could only organise in quiet and through trusted contacts, now they can employ digital networks and mobilise people with agility, on a scale previously unimaginable. In sum, the efficiency of non-state actors has climbed dramatically, with no discernible increase in the power of fragile states.

The proliferation of weapons is weakening the state’s significant edge in using violence. Non-state actors have access to more sophisticated weapons than ever before (e.g., Mexico, Mali, Sudan). Some of this is due to technological change—individuals and small groups can buy cheaper weapons or even develop their own. But the change also arises from other factors, including the entry into the weapons market of new small-arms exporters such as China, the UAE, and Turkey; efforts by Russia to extend its influence into Africa; the actions of Iran through its regional terror alliance; growth in international criminal networks; and multiple state failures (e.g., Libya’s huge arms depots were pillaged).

The result is that non-state actors from the Levant to the Sahel, the Kivus and the Northern Triangle only need cash to buy everything from machine guns to grenade launchers, mortars and explosives. Larger sources of income—from, among other things, illicit mining, smuggling, kidnapping, selling drugs, and extorting local people under their control—have increased their ability to acquire arms. In addition, wealthy countries' funnelling of weapons to countries with weak states due to anxiety over extremist Islamist groups has often led to them being resold to the black market or stolen by the very non-state actors they were meant to be used against.

New ideologies are increasing the centrifugal forces acting on states. Whereas once it was thought (at least in the West) that liberal democracy would triumph everywhere, it is now clear that other ideas are more attractive to many. Indeed, democracy and capitalism have often failed to fulfil their promises in many developing countries, at least partly because they require greater cohesion and better institutions than these states have mustered. Meanwhile, new or resurgent ideas about identity and faith have proliferated in response to the pressures of globalisation. The rise of China, in particular, offers a counterforce against Western democratic ideals that many states have found attractive.

The resulting backlash against liberal democracy takes different forms in different places, but it has been especially destabilising in countries already plagued by high levels of social fragmentation. Muslim majority countries are especially vulnerable because Islam often provides a transnational identity that is relatively easily to mobilise across borders. Indeed, the global spike in violent conflict is concentrated in the Middle East and surrounding territory (the Sahel, Horn of Africa, Afghanistan) where allegiance to the state, generally weak in patrimonial societies anyway, is being supplanted by ethnic, religious, and tribal loyalties and by Jihadism. Most Muslim-majority states in the post-1979 era have thus been caught in a double bind: loyalty to the state has been challenged from without in the form of pan-Islamism or pan-Shiitism, and from within by the strong pull of primordial tribal, ethnic, or minority religion affinities (Libya, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria). In Africa, the inability of Western-allied democratic governments to combat Jihadist groups has combined with longstanding grievances against colonial powers like France to produce a growing number of coups d'état, often allied with Russia.

An increasingly multipolar power dynamic is weakening the international response. The lingering of Russia and the rise or reemergence of China and India and of regional powers such as South Africa, Turkey, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia have cumulatively produced a fragmented international order. (The international community was divided during the Cold War, but between only two protagonists.) These and other new powers have their own ideas about how the international system should be run and their own interests to protect and pursue. In some cases, they directly oppose democracy and human rights; in others, they compete with one another—and the West—to advance their aims.

At the same time, the U.S., and the rest of the West alongside it, has shown a growing reluctance to project force globally and defend the international order it created due to changing ideas at home about its role in the world coupled with perceived economic and financial weakness. Leaders have often been reactive bystanders; and even in those situations perceived to be of direct concern to them, as in the Middle East and

North Africa (MENA), they have failed to act decisively on behalf of their own security and broader interests. These dynamics were already palpable in Syria, where the West played a subordinate role as an array of international actors (Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, and others) intervened in the conflict on various sides.

Globalisation has exacerbated the challenges facing the places most affected by these dynamics. Whereas robust countries can leverage international markets to fuel broad-based growth, in weak states they often exacerbate preexisting divisions and inequalities. Some areas and groups gain while others fall further behind. Elites in such places often monopolise profits garnered from exporting a few commodities and controlling state organs while leveraging their access to overseas banks and lawyers to safely stash their gains safely abroad. They have little incentive to act more inclusively or promote development that benefits populations.

Among the biggest beneficiaries of these trends are criminal networks that often have equivalent or greater power than weak states (and can proactively undermine even relatively sophisticated states such as Mexico). Criminal networks—including drug cartels, human traffickers, computer hackers, counterfeiters and arms dealers—are better financed, more able to leverage globalisation, and less restrained by the need to uphold certain standards of governance. Indeed, their strategies rely precisely and intentionally on efforts to undermine state capacity around the world. Countries such as Russia and Turkey have also benefitted by partnering with weak states and non-state actors to advance their interests; these have fewer qualms about the nature of governance or the impact on the broader international order.

On the whole, the states most at risk from these combined trends are concentrated along an arc from Central Africa to Central Asia (see maps below). They include Libya, Afghanistan, the DRC, the Central African Republic, and many of the countries in the Levant, the Sahel, and the Greater Horn of Africa. Most of them experienced colonisation on the cheap for relatively short periods of time and, ever since, their predominantly undemocratic governments have consistently underinvested in the ingredients of state capacity—including higher education, social cohesion, and managerial skills. Colonisers made little attempt to align borders with sociopolitical realities, or to invest in state institutions except in places where they held sway for very long periods and had ambitions beyond resource extraction, as in India. Unsurprisingly, the post-colonisation states that followed rarely identified or took effective steps to counter the challenges such conditions brought.

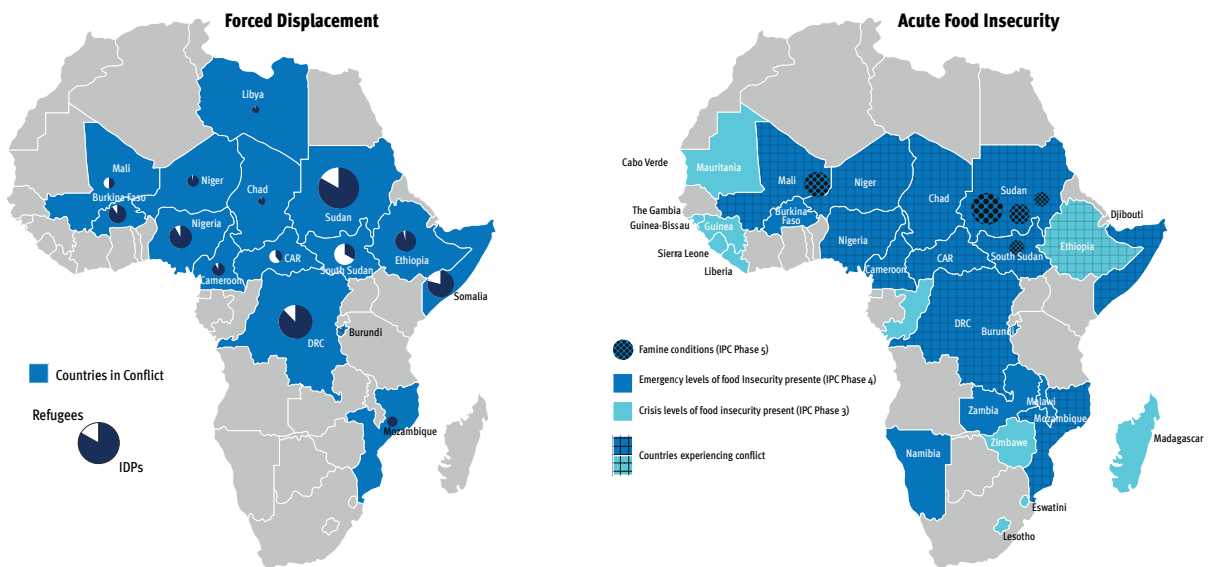
For all these reasons, the time has come to admit the unpleasant. Some sovereignties cannot be “restored” because these sovereignties never built the institutions of a Weberian state in the first place, remaining instead locked in patrimonial politics that have worked against the needed expansion of their formal state institutions.

Figure 2: Fragile and failing states in the Greater Middle East

Anomalies on the Standard Geopolitical Map
 Feeble and Failed States
 That Have Lost Much or
 Most of Their Territory



Figure 3: Fragile and failing African states²



² Africa Center for Strategic Studies, “Famine Takes Grip in Africa’s Prolonged Conflict Zones,” October 15, 2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/famine-takes-grip-in-africas-prolonged-conflict-zones/>; and *Geopolitical Futures*, “Africa’s Worsening Refugee Crisis,” May 23, 2025, <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/africas-worsening-refugee-crisis/>. Both accessed: August 31, 2025.

Part 2: Learning From the Past

This section introduces the idea that the better we understand the history of governance in all its variety, the better we will be able to address the challenges of fragile states now and in the future.

Before Europeans imposed the Westphalian system upon the world as they built empires, large segments of Southeast Asia, Africa, Central Asia, and the Arabian Peninsula (and everywhere else at one time, for the history of robust government is relatively thin) were occupied either by weak states or had no states. This was the case for much the same reason that large parts of the world have fragile states today: they lacked the capacity to effectively govern much of the territory they claimed to control or concluded that the costs of asserting control over peripheries was not worth the benefits. Similarly, just like today, incentives too often encouraged leaders to rule exclusively and to minimise investments in outlying areas that yielded few material advantages; and social divisions (as well as the harsh ways people were treated and often miserable conditions they endured) meant that populations had little loyalty to the territories they inhabited. Indeed, the artful avoidance of government power was common in many places.³

So, what did the governments of the day do in these circumstances? They adjusted their sovereignty to fit their ability to project power. In central or easily reached areas, they exerted a high degree of control. But farther out into “the marches of empire,” they exerted much less. In West Africa, for instance, the Ashanti, who ruled for two centuries in the area around present-day Ghana, conceived of power “as a series of concentric circles . . . rippling out from a center point,” according to scholar Jeffrey Herbst.⁴ Northern Nigeria’s Sokoto Caliphate, one of the largest and most powerful empires in sub-Saharan Africa until British conquest in 1903, exercised power similarly.⁵ So did the Ottoman Empire, which allowed broad autonomy for inner Arabia and North Africa after the 18th century. Meanwhile, in Burma, governments built a “complex patchwork” of “horizontal stratum” centred on dense, permanent settlements in the valleys, with less and less control and expectation of taxation in the more sparsely settled and mountainous areas.⁶

Prior to Western ascendance, this was the governance landscape that prevailed throughout the world. Countries, empires and kingdoms experimented with a wide variety of models to maximise their effectiveness and reach and to minimise the blowback from beyond their outer limits.⁷ Power was continuously renegotiated, especially in the hinterlands. Balance was important to prevent centrifugal forces from undermining authority. In such a world, sovereignty was less absolute, with diverse arrangements more the norm than the exception, and international involvement in states less of an “organized hypocrisy.”⁸

3. James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

4. Jeffrey Herbst, *State and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 45–8.

5. Ibid.

6. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 186–87.

7. Two books do an especially good job discussing how pre-modern states adapted to their circumstances: the aforementioned Herbst book, *State and Power in Africa*, and James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 2009).

8. Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

For present purposes, what stand out are the creative strategies listed below that regimes adopted in response to their challenges. These can shed light on how the weakest states today might better manage their own limitations:

- **Sharing power with local leaders.** Shared control with warlords, feudal masters, tribal chiefs, religious leaders, or elders was critical to the survival of states from Southeast Asia to West Africa. It provided these actors the flexibility to manage their own affairs with little interference as long as they declared allegiance, paid taxes, allowed trade, and refrained from making threats.
- **Sharing power with neighbours.** Although usually not articulated as a strategy, some regimes accepted plural forms of sovereignty in which neighbours had overlapping claims but did not fight over the disputed territory. In some cases, different rights were recognised for different regimes in the same territory, as was the case every time a larger power asserted its right to act in ways that safeguarded its own security against an outside threat.
- **Developing limited national institutions.** Central governments did much less than they do today, focusing on developing defence systems, foreign policy, a single body of law, some form of court or arbitration system, and some form of taxation, but not much more. In this sense, they operated more like a confederacy in which leadership was often corporate such that 1) local representatives or regional heads directly participated or rotated participation in national government; and 2) parliaments were assemblies of locally appointed representatives. Such practices used to be much more common in Europe and continue to influence Switzerland, which has long had a different system of government than its neighbours.
- **Creating tailor-made arrangements.** Instead of using a comprehensive, one-size-fits-all arrangement across its full territory, central governments would customise their approach depending on the outer areas' strategic importance, population density, ease of reach, ease of governance, and local balance of power. The Ottoman Empire ruled several areas indirectly or only nominally—the Hejaz was ruled by the Sharif of Mecca, and Fezzan (Libya's Saharan interior) was run through local chiefs who paid tribute.
- **Focusing on port towns and trade routes.** Rather than placing attention on sprawling, poorer, and more sparsely populated areas of a state, governments in earlier eras placed a premium on port towns and trade routes because they are key sources of power and revenue and easier to control and benefit from.
- **Cordoning off dangerous areas.** Rather than seeking to project authority into uncontrolled or dangerous areas, central governments historically tended to cut them off. A famous example of this is the Great Wall that China built for itself instead of seeking to extend its realm northward into the steppes.
- **Establishing unifying cultural identities.** The more creative rulers fused cultures (Hellenistic kingdoms, Mughal India, and Rome), built hybrid identities, proactively used religion (Islam), fostered economic interdependence, created common standards of law, promoted intermarriage and the circulation of elites (Mongols), and integrated future leaders in schools to build loyalty for the larger polity.
- **Using a variety of methods to reconcile conflicting groups.** While violence was commonly used to settle disputes, a variety of reconciliation methods offered lower cost ways to maintain peace and govern conflicting groups. These included religious practices and rituals; kinship and marriage alliances; compensation and

tribute systems; arbitration by respected elders or neutral parties; and symbolic acts (eg, shared feasts, ceremonial destruction of weapons).

Recent literature on governance and conflict echoes many of these lessons and strategies. For example, decentralisation is sometimes touted as a mechanism to reduce conflict, as in the United Nations-World Bank *Pathways for Peace* report. Conflicts in regions such as Aceh and Iraqi Kurdistan have been ended with unique arrangements that give them a higher degree of autonomy than elsewhere. External anchoring—in which domestic bodies, in essence, share power with a multilateral organisation—has been used in Guatemala, the Balkans, Liberia, and the Solomon Islands. Cities such as Lagos thrive even as significant parts of Nigeria face rising insecurity.⁹ In other words, many fragile governments de facto limit their role to a few core areas.

Yet, the dominant international templates, by and large, are stuck in a different era. An updated framework and set of strategies are needed.

Part 3: Potential Directions in the New Reality

How can governments in fragile and conflict-affected states adapt to the four trends outlined in Part 1? Whereas some have formal institutions that could play some sort of constructive role (eg, Sri Lanka, Nigeria), others have such weak writs that criminal and militant groups have already become as relevant as the state (Haiti, Libya, Somalia). As such, the options will vary. However, below are some of the outlines of a new framework for the new reality.

First, in many cases, a **piecemeal approach** is more likely to leverage the strongest pockets of social cohesion and capable governance that exist. This may mean much more stability and better governance in parts of a country than elsewhere over long stretches of time. The goal would be to incrementally grow or replicate the islands of success rather than seek a formula that accomplishes such a goal nationwide in the short term.

A second and related strategy would be to **focus efforts on a set of urban areas**, which often have greater social cohesion and relatively stronger institutions than weak states. This approach might offer a better pathway forward in large, sprawling countries, such as Nigeria, Mexico, and the DRC, as well as in deeply divided countries such as Sudan. Such an approach would strategically employ urbanisation and extensive decentralisation to launch new urban-based governance (UBG) models. Greatly empowered mayors—or district governors—would be tasked with larger portfolios, handling most facets of government in their areas. Successful cities could then leverage their stronger bureaucracies to manage selective functions (e.g., cadasters) in weaker cities.

Third, countries whose governance capacity is limited and that have difficulty extending their reach to distant territories (or face substantial opposition from locals in doing so) could consider **radically decentralising**. The type and extent of decentralisation would depend on the balance between local and national capabilities and the degree

9. Seth Kaplan, “What Makes Lagos a Model City,” *New York Times*, January 7, 2014.

of cohesion bringing them together, but it could include 1) taxing authority over property, natural resources, sales, and income; 2) cultural issues; 3) security; 4) administration over public services such as education, healthcare, electricity, and planning; and 5) economic development.

Each context would have to work out the best combination, and the centre would still play an important role providing financial and technical assistance, setting minimum standards for governance, and arbitrating differences between groups. This already occurs formally in Kurdistan and informally in Somalia, as well as wherever central governments cannot maintain control over their territory without international help, such as in the DRC, Haiti, Niger, and the Central African Republic. In the most fragile places, national government may even consider working with international actors or neighbouring countries to co-manage key institutions (e.g., judiciary or finance) or parts of their territory (the most outlying areas) until they are able to build up their own capacities to do so effectively.

Fourth, countries with long histories of conflict could consider **using a much greater variety of reconciliation and integration techniques** to enable diverse populations to peacefully live together in the same polity. Postcolonial leaders give a taste of what is possible. Indonesia's Sukarno established a unifying ideology consisting of five principles (Pancasila), selected a neutral language as the national tongue (Bahasa Indonesia), synthesised diverse cultures rather than leaning on the majority Javanese, and made religious accommodation a key feature of his rule. Similarly, Tanzania's Julius Nyerere established a unifying ideology (Ujamaa), selected a neutral national language (Swahili), integrated ethnic groups, systematically inculcated youth in the national identity, and promoted collective development initiatives using various forms of national service. Many African countries have used traditional reconciliation methods (eg, Mozambique, Rwanda) to bring previously warring groups together to live peacefully.

Fifth, instead of focusing on building national governments with strong, comprehensive mandates and powerful leaders in deeply divided polities with weak institutions—which creates zero-sum struggles for power and resources—the aim should be to build a weaker centre with a limited remit that is dependent upon consensus (or a significant majority) to make major decisions. The smaller scope will enable national governments to better leverage their limited management talent effectively, yielding better governance in the process. **Rotating presidencies and executive committees that combine representatives from major groups** are more likely to gain traction because more major actors would have a stake in the outcome, and the risk of exclusion is lower. Indeed, it is hard to imagine some countries surviving as states over the long term without a truncated form of central government along these lines. By contrast, in places where social bonds across groups are slightly better, more effort could be invested in **strengthening social cohesion and the inclusiveness of policies** to reduce the risk of conflict or failure.

Lastly, in a select number of cases, **more flexibility regarding borders** may be necessary. Places such as Somalia and the DRC may be impossible to hold together or reassemble. And although changing borders should be done reluctantly, it should not be ruled out in the most difficult cases, or where there is a long history of suppressing a particular identity group (such as the Isaaq clan in Somaliland).

Case Box: The Examples of Syria and Libya

Syria and Libya offer windows through which to imagine testing alternative models of peacebuilding and governance.

After over a decade of devastating violence that left hundreds of thousands dead and millions displaced, Syria is searching for a way forward after the overthrow of the Assad regime, which had governed the country for more than a half a century. The transitional government under President Ahmed al-Sharaa, which was established in March 2025, faces severe challenges to unifying a highly divided and mistrustful population. National institutions have collapsed or are extremely feeble. Society is deeply divided on ethnic and religious lines, with multiple armed groups, many with external backing, lying outside the government's control.

However, there are several assets that can be built upon. Several social groups—such as the Kurds and Druze—have strong internal cohesion, substantial self-governing institutions, and are geographically concentrated. Urban areas such as Damascus and Aleppo have long histories, distinct identities, and enough capacity to manage most of their own affairs. Syria's pivotal location and long history at the centre of trade routes offers hope for the economy. The diaspora has built knowledge and social networks during the war that could be used to improve the management of institutions and invest in new businesses. Young people, the backbone of opposition to the former regime, are ready for change. The general population is exhausted and eager to move past conflict.

All of this presents **an opportunity to rethink how transitions are advanced and governance works** in a highly fragmented, conflict-prone context. In Syria, this might include:

- Decentralising significant power to homogenous regions and urban areas
- Ensuring transition and post-transitional national governments incorporate representatives from all parts of the country and give minorities veto over major decisions affecting their groups
- Establishing an externally anchored supreme judicial body to arbitrate disputes between parts of the country, hold national leaders accountable, and improve the rule of law
- Partnering with nearby countries to maintain security across Syria and keep spoilers out
- Creating a national agency to leverage diaspora resources in governance and investment and incentivise as many as possible to return to the country

Libya offers another example of a place where alternative models of peace-building and governance could be advanced. The country has experienced major turmoil since the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, with two governments emerging and formal state authority limited to a very small area within the capital. Like many other fragile and conflict-affected states, it simply does not have sufficient social cohesion and institutional capacity to establish a robust and legitimate central government that can control all its territory—even with strong outside support. Instead, the country is divided into many highly splintered groups, with armed militias proliferating across much of its territory. International efforts to restore stability, led by the United Nations, have concentrated on some combination of negotiations, elections, institution building, and the establishment of a national unity government; but the efforts have repeatedly failed.

Yet, viewed from the inside out, Libya has some striking features. Few people die violently on a regular basis in the country thanks to strong cohesion based on tribal or ethnic lines, and the relative success of local negotiations and reconciliation involving these groups and municipalities. Local cohesion and conflict management mechanisms could thus play a larger role in governance if the country was more decentralised. And with good education levels, enough natural resources to fund its own reconstruction, a location near a huge market and major sea lanes, and less of a threat from extremists, Libya offers much potential if it could restore stability.

Bearing these distinctive traits in mind, a more prudent approach to advancing governance and stability in the country would **work sideways, focusing on Libya's strongest political assets**: functional local governance and effective, tribal-based conflict management mechanisms. This might include:

- Decentralising significant governance to subregions and municipalities
- Distributing national institutions strategically across the country
- Incorporating recognised local leaders into national institutions
- Establishing rotating national roles and consensus-driven national institutions
- Establishing several islands of stability that could subsequently advance more autonomously and set models for others to follow

In both cases—Syria and Libya—the result would be only piecemeal progress, working better in some parts of each country than others, and with continued challenges in governance, reconciliation, accountability, and justice; but it would yield enough progress in enough places to reverse the backward momentum that exists today, and these successful pockets could encourage other parts of the country to move in a similar manner. Any success could be subsequently used in countries with similar structural features.

Conclusion: The New Normal

The political map of the world is more complex and dynamic than it has been in recent decades. Instead of being populated by countries that are easy to identify and that measure up against each other, ending with recognisable (if not always agreed upon) boundaries, today it also includes a growing number of non-state forms of public authority, as well as areas with no public authority at all.

Boundaries between these different zones (state controlled, non-state controlled, and non-controlled) are likely to be unstable in a way that recent-century mapmakers will not recognise, sometimes changing regularly as the balance of power between states or between states and non-state actors changes. In such cases, division into pockets of stability, violence, extremist or authoritarian control, and lack of any public authority is highly likely to represent a new normal.

It is crucial that peacemakers—whether inside or outside fragile and conflict-affected states in transition—adapt. Given the international context, local leaders have an especially crucial role to play if new approaches are to be tested and implemented. Too often, politicians support these kinds of reforms when in opposition or back them rhetorically to gain public support but then either turn against them or do nothing to advance them as soon as they gain power. In such cases, social groups, urban leaders, and businesses—all of which have much to gain from reform albeit for different reasons—should unite to pressure leaders to more proactively advance these ideas. Where they are leaders or enough important actors searching to change direction, outsiders—including multilateral organisations, diplomats, and policymakers—should step up their support for local innovation and let go of the older paradigms that are no longer fit for purpose.

On current trends, the fragility of many states is likely to increase in the coming years and will require a different approach. Instead of seeking comprehensive national solutions as the rule, the default focus should be on piecemeal transitions that operate according to a sideways logic that leverages pockets of cohesion and robust institutions in whatever form they already exist. This would yield flatter, more horizontal states, deeply decentralised, with a mosaic of different governance approaches rather than a standard unitary model.

National governments will continue to have an important role to play, including to arbitrate differences between groups, set minimum standards, manage the currency and macroeconomy, ensure security and the rule of law is maintained across the whole territory, and fight for the country's interests internationally. It's especially crucial that they mediate differences and enforce the rule of law equitably across groups if violence is to be avoided. But in today's weak states, they need fewer responsibilities and smaller budgets, with more flexible pathways and longer time horizons for reaching anything approaching a Weberian strong state.

The fact is that most fragile and conflict-affected states must first move from disorder to order, building institutions that can work at a minimum level before growing in capacity, reach, and ambition over time. This is the reality in an age of state disintegration.

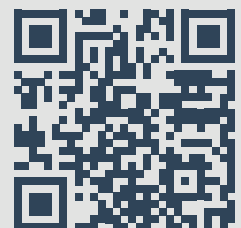


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