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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another common spillover is the uncontrolled flow of refugees. In 2015, great numbers of asylum seekers and migrants from Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan, and other conflict zones risked the treacherous journey across the Mediterranean, often by dinghy, testing the unity of the European Union. Closer to Syria, the same exodus placed extraordinary social, economic, and political strains on Lebanon and Jordan, where, by early 2017, Syrian refugees accounted for approximately 25 percent and 10 percent of the total national population in those countries, respectively.[7] One lesson is that humanitarian crises can have profound political consequences, not only for the nation at war, but also for the countries that end up hosting them.[8]

At the same time, the spillover risks that contemporary civil wars pose – particularly to the United States – should be kept in perspective. For one thing, the connection between internal disorder and transnational threats is situation-specific and contingent on an array of intervening factors and contextual conditions.[9] For another, none of the transnational dangers that arise from civil wars pose an existential threat to the United States. They are thus hardly comparable to the risks of a potential military clash with a nuclear-armed adversary like Russia or China. Indeed, only rarely do such spillovers rise to the top tier of U.S. national security priorities.

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

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

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

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

This view was reinforced by the spread of new Al Qaeda and Islamic State "franchises" in insecure, turbulent, or war-torn countries like Libya, Mali, Nigeria, and Yemen, and, of course, by the emergence of the Islamic "State" in war-torn Syria and Iraq. With bipartisan support in Congress, the Obama administration elevated the elimination of terrorist safe havens to a centerpiece of U.S. counterterrorism efforts.[14] This full-spectrum approach included building the capacity of vulnerable partners (like Mali) to undertake counterterrorism operations; expanding drone strikes to assassinate suspected terrorists in "ungoverned areas" (like Pakistan's tribal belt); providing logistical support for intervention by allies (like Saudi Arabia) in civil wars in other countries (like Yemen); deploying U.S. special forces to advise friendly governments battling insurgents (as in Iraq, Libya, and the Philippines); offering intelligence to beleaguered partners facing armed extremists (like Nigeria); supporting counterterrorism efforts by regional bodies (like the African Union in Somalia); and countering extremism in violence-prone states (including through multilateral efforts like the Global Counterterrorism Forum).

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

A close look at the evidence, however, suggests that the link between war-torn states and transnational terrorism is more complicated and conditional than commonly imagined. To begin with, the vast majority of terrorist acts in such countries are perpetrated by local groups motivated by local grievances. To be sure, homegrown extremists operating in civil conflicts sometimes pledge fealty to a broader umbrella group with global aspirations. One example is the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, which in 2007 changed its name to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Another is Nigeria's Boko Haram, which offered its allegiance to the Islamic State. But such opportunistic "branding" efforts appear to have little impact on such groups' national or regional focus.

Second, many war-torn states are not hospitable settings for transnational terrorists.[17] Indeed, the notion of a "safe haven" in a violent, collapsed polity "is a bit of an oxymoron."[18] Recent research "suggests that conditions in failed states present major operational challenges for foreign terrorists."[19] Al Qaeda's experiences in Somalia during the early 1990s are telling. According to intercepted messages, Al Qaeda's operatives repeatedly complained about how hard it was to live, plan, raise funds, and conduct operations in a Hobbesian environment with only limited operational security, sources of finance, communications capabilities, transportation infrastructure, and local support.[20] The collapse of state sovereignty in Somalia also left Al Qaeda more vulnerable to attacks by the United States.[21] Rather than work in such chaotic conditions, transnational terrorist groups may find it more congenial to set up shop in weak states that fall closer to the middle of the fragility spectrum: that is, in nations where governance may be corrupt, dysfunctional, and uneven, but which have not yet failed and collapsed into violence.[22]

Third, political and cultural variables are critical. Whether or not transnational terrorists find unstable or war-torn countries hospitable to their operations depends heavily on the political context, including the state's capacity to administer its territory and, importantly, its attitude toward would-be jihadists. Where the government is supportive (as the Taliban was in the case of Al Qaeda) or turns a blind eye (as elements of the Pakistan government have toward several extremist factions) such groups are more likely to flourish. Likewise, the global *salafi* jihad has a better chance to secure a haven in countries – or "alternatively governed" regions of countries[23] – where its brand of Sunni extremism resonates with local tribes.

Fourth, we should acknowledge that the manner in which U.S. analysts define and classify violent attacks can skew our view of the relationship between terrorism and war-torn states. When officials at the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center and other entities collect data, for instance, they typically code as "terrorist attacks" those violent tactics adopted by insurgents (such as the Taliban) in internationalized civil wars, including in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. The results can be ironic. By this reckoning, some 80 percent of the Americans killed by "terrorists" between 9/11 and 2015 were killed during combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, two countries where sustained U.S. military involvement

was justified precisely to eliminate or prevent terrorist safe havens.[24] Or, as Bridget L. Coggins has written, "Much of the [perceived] relationship between state failure and terrorism can plausibly be explained by 'terrorism as war fighting.'"[25] No doubt, the line between insurgents and terrorists can blur (as can the line between terrorists' local versus global aspirations). But treating terrorists and insurgents as identical risks inflating what is at stake for the United States in others' civil wars, particularly in the Islamic world.

Fifth, the increasingly decentralized nature of transnational terrorist networks suggests that war-torn states may be less essential to their operations than often imagined. To be sure, the creation of an IS "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq, with its capital Raqqa, provided the organization with a useful territorial base – and an awesome propaganda coup. "These fighters can exploit their safe haven to plan, coordinate, and carry out attacks against the U.S. and Europe," Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel explained in 2015.[26] And yet many attacks against American and European targets have been perpetrated by radicalized citizens living within marginalized immigrant populations in the West, rather than being directed and launched by terrorists from a remote IS enclave.[27] Consider the November 2015 mass murder at the Bataclan concert venue in Paris, perpetrated by a cell of European Union citizens and permanent residents, or the June 2016 slaughter at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, committed by a U.S. citizen born to Afghan immigrants. Lone wolf actors, often cultivated by Internet extremists, have become a major worry for law enforcement.

By contrast, "there is no evidence to suggest that terrorists who cross borders to carry out attacks in other countries predominantly originate from failed states."[28] If anything, the flow has been in the opposite direction, with foreign terrorist fighters traveling from the West and middle-income Arab countries to civil war zones. This pattern, of course, is not set in stone. The same fighters could later return to their home countries, even more committed to the jihadist cause and determined to use new combat skills to perpetrate violence there – just as Muslim volunteers who flocked from Gulf countries to resist the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan subsequently returned as battle-hardened mujahideen.

Fortunately for us all, the connection between war-torn states and transnational terror seems particularly tenuous when it comes to WMD (weapons of mass destruction) terrorism. Since 9/11, U.S. officials and experts have been understandably worried about the convergence among failed states, terrorists, and technologies of mass destruction. "Let's be honest with ourselves," Secretary of Defense Gates suggested in a 2008 speech, "the most likely catastrophic threats to the U.S. homeland – for example, that of a U.S. city being poisoned or reduced to rubble by a terrorist attack – are more likely to emanate from failing states than from aggressor states." Fortunately, this scenario seems remote, especially for nuclear weapons.[29] It is not easy for terrorists to get their hands on a functioning nuclear device, or even to construct one themselves, given limited access to fissile material. And of the countries that currently possess nuclear weapons, only two – Pakistan and North Korea – regularly appear on lists of weak or failing states, and neither are war-torn. This is not a counsel of complacency. Either nation could collapse into violence, potentially losing control of its arsenal, or decide to sell or transfer its nukes to nonstate actors or another nation. But national security officials would be better served by paying more attention to the trajectory of the specific regimes in Islamabad and Pyongyang, as opposed to the generic category of "failed" or "war-torn" states.

The most important benefits that war-torn states provide to transnational terrorist groups are symbolic. Civil war in the Arab and broader Muslim world provides radical jihadists with evidence that the old political order – dominated by corrupt, apostate regimes and their Western enablers – is crumbling, allowing a caliphate to emerge that will unite and restore dignity to the *ummah*, the community of believers. For extremists wallowing in a narrative of decline and humiliation, a war for Islam against infidel imperialists makes a powerful recruiting tool. If that is so, it lends credence to the arguments of scholars like political scientist Robert Pape who warn that military interventions – whether direct (Afghanistan, Iraq) or by proxy (Syria, Somalia, Yemen) – only enlarge the tumor of Islamic radicalism that Western governments are trying to excise.[30]

At first glance, the link between war-torn states and transnational crime seems strong – at least for some illegal activities. Afghanistan produces some 70 percent of the world's opium and Colombia produces a plurality of its coca.[31] In Africa, Somalia, the quintessential collapsed state, and Nigeria, which has lawless coastal regions, have been epicenters for maritime piracy.[32] Meanwhile, Guinea-Bissau – not war-torn but politically unstable – became for several years a subsidiary of Latin American drug cartels, who used the tiny country as a transshipment point for South American cocaine destined for European markets.[33] Or consider the chaos and power vacuum following the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011, which allowed enterprising criminals to seize weapons from Muammar Gaddafi's arsenal and traffic them across the Sahara. The resulting flood of weapons helped a rebel coalition topple the democratically elected government in Mali in May 2012, and armed a jihadist alliance that gained temporary control over the country's northeast.[34]

Certainly, too, distinctions between insurgents and criminals often blur in war-torn states. Rebels and extremist movements like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Taliban, or the Islamic State have often resorted to criminal activities (such as kidnapping, extortion, or drug trafficking) to finance their activities, just as criminal groups have appropriated the methodologies of terrorists and insurgents to combat law enforcement and intimidate publics.[35] And particularly when linked to insurgency movements, illicit networks can nurture an alternative form of governance that Vanda Felbab-Brown labels "protostates," in which criminals can win the allegiance of the population by delivering some measure of basic services, as well as human security.[36]

Here again, though, nuance is warranted. Much of the organized crime in war-torn states is localized, and the connections between state failure and transnational crime vary depending on the type of criminal activity.[37] Most countries experiencing civil war, for instance, are not heavily implicated in illegal cross-border ventures like human trafficking, money laundering, drug trafficking, or environmental crime (to say nothing of intellectual property theft, cybercrime, and manufacturing of counterfeit merchandise). As with terrorism, it is not state failure that criminals find advantageous, but a more modest level of state weakness: collapsed and war-torn states are generally less attractive than superficially functional states that maintain a baseline level of political order and easy access to the infrastructure of global commerce, but also where corruption is rife, the rule of law absent or imperfectly applied, and gaps in public services and shortages in licit economic opportunities provide openings for illicit actors.

To sell illegal commodities and launder the proceeds, criminals need secure access to financial services and modern telecom-

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

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

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

A third category comprises those states that are so penetrated by corruption that they have become fully functioning criminal enterprises, justifying the term "Mafia state," popularized by columnist Moisés Naím. A relevant case is Liberia, which under former strongman President Charles Taylor auctioned off elements and symbols of sovereignty – including diamond mine concessions, ship registries, and passports – to the highest bidder. But state capture is not confined to war-torn states. Several high-ranking Venezuelan officials have been officially labeled "drug kingpins" by the U.S. government. Today, the quintessential "Soprano state" may be North Korea, whose authoritarian regime keeps itself afloat by trafficking in illicit commodities from methamphetamines to weapons.[40]

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

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

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

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

Let us first consider the question of risk. A nation's vulnerability to infectious disease is a function not only of the state of public health infrastructure, but also of ecological, geographic, cultural, technological, and demographic variables.[43] Today, as Paul Wise and Michele Barry note, the main global "hotspots" for emerging infectious diseases are "areas where new or intense human activity coincides with high wildlife and microbial diversity."[44] In principle, a civil war in any of these regions would reduce state capacities for prevention, detection, and response. But a country's performance in managing disease outbreaks is also shaped by the quality of the nation's governance, regardless of whether it is experiencing violent conflict. In the first decade of the millennium, China, Indonesia, and South Africa all failed in their responses to particular epidemics (respectively, SARS, avian influenza, and HIV/AIDS) in part because of their regimes' lack of candor and resistance to external assistance. Finally, the global salience of local infectious disease outbreaks is likely to be greater the more tightly integrated the site of the outbreak is to modern transportation and trading networks – a fact that could help contain epidemics in many, though certainly not all, war-torn states.[45]

A partial and worrisome exception to this generalization is the 2014 Ebola outbreak in the West African nations of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea, all desperately poor countries that had emerged from civil wars but were still recovering from those conflicts. Previous incidences of Ebola had arisen in isolated locations and rapidly burned themselves out. This time, the situation quickly escalated into a public health emergency of international concern. Although the epidemic was largely confined to these three countries, where it took an estimated 11,301 lives (and only fifteen elsewhere), it might well have spread further.[46] Institutional weaknesses in all three nations gave momentum to the epidemic, which overwhelmed rudimentary national capacities for delivering primary care and monitoring and responding to infectious disease. Before the outbreak, for instance, Liberia had only one doctor and thirty nurses per one hundred thousand inhabitants.[47] In addition, populations were wary of cooperating with government officials throughout the crisis, reflecting a low level of confidence in public institutions that is a common feature of postconflict societies.

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

The three transnational threats discussed above differ in fundamental respects, of course. Jihadist terrorism is a political activity undertaken by religiously motivated, nonstate groups that are convinced that attacks on government and civilian targets – and, in the case of IS, incitement of civil war – will hasten the arrival of a new order in the form of a caliphate consistent with their uncompromising ideology. Transnational crime is, on the other hand, an economic activity, whose profit-motivated practitioners respond to demand and supply signals in the global marketplace for illicit commodities. Pandemic disease, finally, is a "threat without a threatener," which arises when new or reemerging pathogens exploit gaps in national and global systems for prevention, detection, and response.

As the world becomes more interdependent – politically, economically, and epidemiologically – we should expect transnational terrorism, crime, and epidemics to exploit new networks and vectors. But whether or not civil war will be a major catalyst in their spread remains unclear. The analysis above suggests that violent conflict can often be as much of a hindrance as an enabling factor in the spread of transnational terrorism, cross-border crime, and infectious disease. Too much insecurity and violence can eliminate terrorist safe havens and complicate illicit trafficking. Civil war can also isolate countries and regions from transportation linkages that might otherwise facilitate the rapid spread of disease outbreaks.

Of greater global concern than war-torn states may be relatively functional states that maintain certain trappings of sovereignty but are institutionally anemic, thanks to endemic corruption and winner-take-all politics. (Indeed, securing and privatizing national revenue streams is too often the primary goal of ruling regimes.)[49] Such countries have not collapsed into war but often struggle to deliver the goods associated with modern statehood, notably maintaining a stable economy, delivering basic social welfare, providing accountable governance, and securing their territory and frontiers. Overall, civil wars may pose fewer dangers to global security than "areas of limited statehood," to use Thomas Risse and Eric Stollenwerk's phrase.[50]

Whether a war-torn state generates negative cross-border spillovers is contingent on intervening variables. A nonexhaustive list might include the nature and capabilities of the governing regime, the presence of "alternatively governed" spaces, the causes of the underlying conflict and its duration and intensity, the existence of illicit commodities in high international demand, the country's geographic location and integration into the world economy, and the influence of powerful external state actors.

The most important factor is the capacity and commitment of the government itself to address the relevant threat. For instance, in cases where the ruling regime is sympathetic toward jihadist terrorism, implicated in illicit trafficking, or unrespon-

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

More generally, opportunities for transnational spillovers will inevitably be shaped by the nature of the specific civil war, including its root causes, territorial range, duration, and ferocity. A sectarian conflict that resonates with religious communities in other nations, for example, is more likely to become linked with transnational terrorism than a more straightforward struggle for power between ethnic groups within a particular nation. Similarly, while many civil wars are motivated and/or sustained by the presence of natural resources and the struggle to control these, cross-border spillovers will be more likely when the relevant commodities are illicit and in high global demand, such as narcotics, the production and trafficking of which benefits from local insecurity. Similarly, all things being equal, the linkage between internal strife and transnational threats is likelier to be tightest when the war-torn state is in close proximity to or has ready access to the transportation infrastructure, communications networks, financial systems, and other sinews of globalization.

Finally, the involvement of outside powers – either neighboring states or great powers – can determine whether violent conflict stays contained within or spills over the borders of war-torn states. External involvement can also influence whether cross-border networks of illicit actors emerge and flourish, or instead find themselves targeted and even eliminated. With this in mind, it is worthwhile to consider whether the contemporary world is entering a new phase, more reminiscent of the Cold War than the first two decades that followed it. During the long bipolar confrontation, many civil wars were internationalized, not least in the developing world. As global power continues to diffuse and geopolitical competition reemerges, we may well enter a new era of internationalized civil wars. If so, we should expect, as Barry Posen does, that local conflicts will increasingly become settings for proxy battles between powerful external actors pursuing their own agendas.[51] Were this trend to gain momentum, the result could be an increase in the number, duration, and severity of civil wars, with a concomitant erosion in world order, particularly when it comes to cooperative efforts to manage violent conflict.

Acknowledging the importance of such intervening variables and contextual factors is critical for policy-makers, as it can help the United States avoid a "whack-a-mole" strategy, according to which all war-torn or failed states are threats to U.S. national security. An obvious place to begin would be for the executive branch to direct the U.S. intelligence community to develop a "consequences matrix" that assesses potential transnational spillovers from an updated list of war-torn and post-conflict states. Ideally, it would rank these cross-border consequences according to both likelihood and importance, as well as analyze the most relevant causal linkages. Attention to intervening variables should also widen the range of policy options for U.S. officials, potentially allowing them to tailor responses and target interventions that can cut any identified links between a particular civil war and a specific transnational threat (such as drug production or trafficking). Such a selective, nuanced approach is also more likely to resonate with the American public, whose exhaustion with nation-building abroad was one factor that propelled Donald J. Trump to the presidency.

A more realistic assessment of the dangers that civil wars pose to the United States can also reorient our attention from strategic to moral considerations. It is the suffering of strangers, more than any other spillover, that should motivate U.S. and global concern with war-torn states. Since the end of the Cold War, and especially since 9/11, U.S. political leaders and national security officials have repeatedly warned of the "coming anarchy" that flows from failed states.[52] But the greatest "threat" posed by internal violence is to our common humanity. Failed and war-torn states are the world's greatest generators of human misery. They are the overwhelming source of the world's refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the settings for some of the world's worst human rights abuses, including mass atrocities like genocide, ethnic cleansing, and systematic rape. They are also, often, the countries furthest from international development objectives, including the Sustainable Development Goals.

It is humanitarian concerns, above all, that justify U.S. involvement in most contemporary war-torn states. In 2016, the global number of displaced persons reached a record 65.6 million (including 40.3 million IDPs, 22.5 million refugees, and 2.8 million asylum seekers with cases pending). More than half of all refugees came from just three war-torn countries: Syria, Afghanistan, and South Sudan.[53] The other seven nations rounding out the top ten were also experiencing (or recovering from) high levels of violence: Somalia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, Myanmar, Eritrea, and Burundi. In addition to those who crossed borders, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that, in 2016, 6.9 million people were newly displaced within their own countries by conflict or persecution.[54] Beyond disrupting the lives of tens of millions, the contemporary crisis of displacement places heavy demands on host countries, which must cope not only with unanticipated costs, but also, as Sarah Kenyon Lischer notes, with the prospect that new arrivals "may exacerbate existing political, ethnic, or religious tensions."[55]

As one would expect, mass atrocity crimes also occur primarily during wartime, particularly in communal conflicts pitting rival ethnic and/or religious communities against each other. While assessments vary, over the past decade, mass atrocities have arguably been committed in at least ten countries, among them Burundi, the Central African Republic, Eritrea, Iraq, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan, Sudan, Sri Lanka, and, of course, Syria, all of which have experienced significant internal upheaval and violence.[56]

Finally, as economist Paul Collier has written, civil war is "development in reverse."[57] The inhabitants of countries experiencing (or recently emerged from) civil war are more likely than their counterparts in other countries to be poor and malnourished, endure gender discrimination, lack access to education and basic health care, and die young or suffer from chronic illness. Over the past quarter-century, the world has made tremendous advances in development. The number of people living in extreme poverty has been halved, as has the number of low-income countries (having a gross national income per capita of $1,045 or less). Of the thirty-one low-income countries – all but five of which (Afghanistan, Cambodia, Haiti, Nepal, and North Korea) are in sub-Saharan Africa – approximately half are experiencing or recovering from internal conflict.[58]

Analysts and policy-makers alike should bear these data points in mind when they assess and communicate to the public what is at stake for the United States in other peoples' civil wars. It is the chance to alleviate the suffering of strangers, more than any narrow national benefit.

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