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The Dimensions and Attributes of State Failure in Syria

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ABSTRACT

While state failure was undoubtedly a factor in, and influence on, the uprising, it has become more clearly apparent in the ongoing civil war. The Syrian state can now be said to be 'failed' because it cannot meet its citizens' economic, political and social needs and requirements. This apparent regression is even more striking because pre-war Syria was a regional leader in a number of development fields whose progress was evidenced in associated outputs and levels of performance. This article will provide insight into a number of different dimensions of the country's statehood, in so doing, trace the process through which the state's internal and external legitimacy has been sharply diminished. In addition, the paper also highlights how the Syrian state has adjusted to the condition of state failure. The article therefore proposes to examine different aspects and dimensions of state failure, as opposed to the general condition that has been reproduced across various contexts. In concluding, the article puts forward a number of propositions for how international actors can address a number of the challenges and problems associated with state failure.

Introduction

In seeking to conceptualize the state, the observer encounters intertwined concepts and terms, including the weak, fragile, failed and collapsed state, whose definition reflects the time when they were approved by institutions. International law establishes that a state 'exists' when it is recognized by other states as the highest political authority in a given territory and is treated as an 'equal' by other members of the international 'community' of states. Statehood has a number of different dimensions, which include a permanent population, defined territory and government, and the ability to enter into relations with other states.[1] When these (and other features) are present, then external recognition is forthcoming. Force, or the ability to exert force, is also key to statehood. Machiavelli suggested that it was the foundational element of a state, while Weber observed that 'a state [is] a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory'; although actors may justifiably exert force, it is ultimately true that 'the right to used physical force is ascribed to other institutions or to individuals only to the extent to which the state permits it'. Weber also defines the state as a corporate group that has compulsory jurisdiction, exercises continuous organization, and claims a monopoly of force over a territory and its population.

He adds that it is a permanent institutional core of political authority that sustains regimes, which remains in place despite changes in government[2]; Mann describes this as state infrastructural power, which he defines as its ability to 'penetrate its territories and logistically implement decisions'.[3] Soifer develops several indicators of state infrastructural power. First, the size and strength of the military and police forces is a proxy of state coercive capacity as the state primarily enforces its laws though these institutions and uses them to eliminate internal competition.[4] Tilly suggests the modern state performs four basic functions, specifically war-making (eliminating external threats); state making (the consolidation of power over territory and the removal of internal competition); protection (ensuring the security of people) and extraction/taxation (acquiring the means to perform its coercive functions).[5] When engaged in narrow economic terms, the state is instead understood as a set of institutions that governs property rights and contracts.[6] In this arrangement, all benefit from the state's activities. This clearly contrasts with Marxian and Gramscian theories that view the state as being aligned with the interests of capital.[7]

States are weak when security, service provision and the protection of basic rights are disrupted.[1] State weakness is linked to political violence in two ways; first, if the state is weak, it is not able to deter restive ethnic, religious groups or other threats to peace, as was shown in the north and north-east of Syria, in the Aleppo, Ar-Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor governorates.[8] Second, it is unable to defeat groups who are committed to violence, as in Idlib governorate, where Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), a jihadist organization, has emerged and developed. Even unpopular regimes are able to stamp out potentially violent opposition when they have sufficient resources to overwhelm the insurgents directly, arrest their leaders or otherwise interfere with group organization. As the state weakens, insurgencies and terrorist organizations become more difficult to defeat.[9] However, state weakness is a permissive condition for political violence, and will not therefore necessarily explain everything about it.

The concept of fragility refers to a specific object and can be measured. Fragile states are particularly vulnerable to internal and external shocks and domestic and international conflicts.[10] The concept has been widely used by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank since the mid-2000s to refer to the poorest and most unstable states that are unable to meet minimum standards. However, the concept has been used more generally by scholars and analysts to refer to countries where the authority, capacity and legitimacy of state institutions are dramatically declining, weak or broken.[11] The U.K's Department for International Development (DFID) outlines four broad categories of 'indicative features of fragile states' (state authority for safety and security, effective political power, economic management, and administrative capacity to deliver services), which are each categorized in terms of 'capacity' and 'willingness' to provide.[12] In addition, the Fund for Peace identified the fragile state by referring to several indicators, including cohesion, economic, political, social (refugees and ID) and crosscutting (external intervention) ones.

The US-based Task Force, meanwhile, observes that 'state failure' occurs when central state authority 'collapse[s] for several years' as a result of revolutionary wars,[13] ethnic wars,[14] adverse regime changes[15] and genocide/politicide.[16] These states vary in terms of their form and internal composition, and this is perhaps why it is standard practice to define them in terms of what they are not—that is, as successful states[17] who are able to

control defined territories and populations, conduct diplomatic relations with other states, monopolize legitimate violence within their territories and meet popular demand for social goods. Ignatieff suggests that state failure occurs when 'the central government loses the monopoly of the means of violence' while Zartman adds it occurs when 'the basic functions of the state are no longer performed [and] the structure, authority (legitimate power), law, and political order have fallen apart'.[18] This clearly recalls Rotberg's claim that nation-states fail because they can no longer deliver positive political goods to their people, resulting in a loss of legitimacy.[19]

War is often a cause of state failure and is almost always a factor in collapse. When the state cannot repel external attacks, preserve regional unity or eliminate any threat to the local structure, it is failed. Failed states then are confronted by many insurgencies, which are directed at the state and groups within it. Scott reiterates this when he observes that selective group violence is a product of elite-propagated 'founding narratives' that elevate one subnational group and exclude others from *state* power.[20] As the state falters, its demise is anticipated in advance as rebel groups and other competitors threaten the residents of central cities and overwhelm demoralized government contingents. State failure takes many forms; the first is the splitting of a country into different entities, as one or more secessionist movements succeed in taking over part of the territory and form functioning quasi states.

For example, just over a decade of war in Syria has produced a failed state that has lost control of large parts of its territory and borders. In the case of the Syrian war, 'civil' is therefore more than slightly misleading, as local, regional and global actors share responsibility for the current state of affairs. For example, in the north-west of Syria, the Syrian government has been supplanted by local councils. Turkey's military offensives ('Euphrates Shield', 'Olive Branch' and Peace Spring") in this part of the country have given it extensive influence and it works through these councils to provide a range of economic, education, health and sports-related outputs. Meanwhile, in the northeast of the country, the Kurdish Administration attends to popular affairs, and the Legislative Council performs the tasks of the local city council (government departments are subordinate to it).[21] However, this is hardly a model of 'multi-level' governance, as the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) implements and upholds exclusionary governance. The central authority disappears, and territory is de facto parcelled out among a heterogeneous mix of traditional authorities, religious leaders, warlords and even nongovernmental organizations, who perform some state functions at the local level. In the absence of effective government control, both violence and illicit economic activity flourish and both opposition groups and leaders of quasi states take advantage, and this is one of the main reasons why failed states are breeding grounds for extremism and organized terrorist groups.[22]

'Failed' states are also linked to a range of economic, military, political and social problems and produce a wide range of negative consequences for their own populations, the wider region and the global community.[23] Helman and Ratner concur that a failed state would '[imperil] their own citizens and [threaten] their neighbours through refugee flow, political instability and random warfare'. [24] Here it is instructive to recall the UN's observation that the Syrian Civil War is the largest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War, in which approximately 5.7 million Syrians have been driven out of the country and 6.2 million have been internally displaced.[25] In March 2018, Syrian Human

Rights Watch observed around 511,000 Syrians had been killed since the beginning of the war, which worked out as 6,800 killed every month in the period March 2011-March 2018.[26]

A collapsed state is the culmination of various degrees of state failure, and is both rare and extreme. Here there is a vacuum of authority and citizens become inhabitants of a characterless terrain. In the absence of the state, sub-state actors become pre-eminent and establish their own local security apparatuses and mechanisms, sanctioned markets and other trading arrangements in what had been a nation-state.[27] Zartman proposes that state collapse occurs when states can no longer perform the functions that are required of them. For him, it is not therefore the 'collapse' of a physical infrastructure but rather the loss of a functional capacity that defines this process. However, the issue is complicated by the fact that Zartman does not clearly define which functions he is referring to.[28] State collapse relates to three functions: the state as sovereign authority (an accepted source of identity and the arena of politics), as an institution (a tangible decision-making organization and an intangible symbol of identity) and as security guarantor for a populated territory.[29] These functions are so intertwined that it becomes difficult to perform them separately, and the weakening of one drags the others down.

Finally, States that fail to meet minimum standards are 'weak' or 'fragile',[30] The loss of the decision-making centre of government results in a paralysed and inoperative state in which laws are not made, order is not preserved and social cohesion is not enhanced.[31] The state is also no longer a symbol of identity, and does not confer a name on its people or give meaning to their social action[32] and nor is it a central sovereign authority that provides security[33] or a basis for the conduct of public affairs.[34] This raises the question of how 'fragile' and 'failed' states are related. Intuitively, we might assume that the former is a precursor to the latter. Within the literature, there appears to be an assumption that an accumulation of factors that contribute to state fragility will ultimately result in state failure. This positions state failure, albeit in its final phase, as a precursor to state collapse.[35] When a state fails, there is still a government (albeit a dysfunctional one) that can be dealt with; in instances of state collapse, however, the absence of a governing regime will make the standard tools of international diplomacy and/or coercion ineffective. On the basis of the preceding discussion we can appropriately describe Syria as a fragile state, that ultimately failed because it was unable to fulfil a range of economic, political, social, and security functions. However, it would be inappropriate to refer to it as a 'collapsed state' because a number of these functions continued to be performed, albeit insufficiently.

Declining of capital national and its influences on economic failure

After 2000, Syria underwent limited economic liberalization, which created competition for (dwindling) public resources and increased social inequality and deepened socio-economic inequalities.[36] This was however more of an opportunity for crony capitalism than genuine reform.[37] Although Assad sought to access the benefits of the global market by 'opening up' to private banks and stock markets, establishing free trade zones and lowering tariffs, these reforms were uncoordinated. Inequality increased and the status of the middle class was undermined. Once the conflict began, the price of the US dollar relative to the Syrian pound rose exponentially.[38] Unemployment and poverty were

particularly pronounced among the young, and in 2017, the unemployment rate was 50 percent, and more than three-quarters were (82.5 percent) of Syrians lived below the poverty line.[39] Economic sanctions introduced by the EU and US also contributed to high unemployment in Aleppo, where industry had previously been the main economic sector. Unemployment also rose and the government was unable to provide support and aid.[40] Iranian associations also took advantage of the Syrian currency dropping to its lowest level by purchasing real estate in east and west Aleppo.[41]

Parts of the country (such as the north and northeast) that had historically derived their income from agriculture found this was no longer possible after the Regime adopted a policy of mass destruction and demolished cities and villages. Its scorched-earth policies also impacted displacement, both internally and externally. For example, in al-Hasakah governorate, the cessation of economic activity (including trade) and an unemployment rate of over 90 percent, exponential price increases and the collapse of public service provision also drove outward movement.[42] Ar-Raqqa, the most important source of renewable energy in the country that also has gas and oil resources, was similarly impacted.[43] Whereas the economic resources of governorates such as Deir ez-Zor (previously first in the production of cotton and third in the production of wheat) were previously coveted by the Regime and the Opposition, they were now deliberately destroyed. Economic decline and increased unemployment was in large part due to the loss of many main border crossings (including Azaz, Bab al-Hawa, and Idlib-Aleppo) that had, through both customs and transit, previously generated enormous funds and foreign exchange reserves.[44]

Declining real national and per capita levels of annual GDP are indicators of state failure. Inequality, and specifically disparities of income between the wealthiest and poorest fifths of the population, is also an indicator. Relevant indicators include the highest and lowest 10% revenue share; the urban-rural dispersal of rural services; access to advanced services; and the size of the slum population. When these factors are taken into account, a 'score' is produced, with '0' is even economic development and '10' is uneven economic development. Syria's scores were 7.8 in 2016, 8.1 in 2017, 8.5 in 2018 and 8.8 in 2019, which attests to the growth of economic inequality and poverty in the war.[45] It has been estimated that a number of factors, including insanely high inflation and prices, have caused the Syrian economy to lose more than 440 billion dollars (USD) since the start of the conflict. Three quarters of the population live below the poverty line and 60 percent are unemployed. An estimated 90 percent of those in Regime-controlled areas live in extreme poverty and around 12 million of the country's inhabitants are food insecure.[46] High official state deficits fund extravagant security expenditures and the siphoning of cash by friendly elites, and inflation usually soars because rulers raid the central bank and print money. The private sector is not a source of innovation and dynamism but instead produces crony capitalism. Smuggling becomes widespread and the local currency is replaced by international currencies. Moneychangers, both legal and illegal, are everywhere and arbitrage becomes an established and recognized practice. In Syria, the economic indicators of state failure were the collapse of the national currency, destruction of parts of the country's economic infrastructure, the government's loss of control over oil resources, inflation, and rising public poverty and unemployment.

Depleted and damaged social services sector on state failure

The Syrian state is a regional leader in securitization, that since the beginning of the uprising, it used violent means. This extensive use of violence reflects the fragility of the Syrian state, which, despite its continued possession of a number of preconditions of statehood and international recognition, has now become a failed state. When Bashar al-Assad came to power, there was hope among Syrians that he would initiate and guide political reform.[47] However, accumulated grievances and resentments, some of which predated his election as president, produced widespread public protests in March 2011. A fragility phase, which included an economic downturn, reduced security and legitimacy deficits,[48] therefore proceeded state failure, were also an important influence in this phase. The arbitrary use of state authority, bribery and corruption have also emerged as important considerations, as ruling elites invest their gains overseas. In Syria, corruption in Syria occurs at both the political 'macro' and administrative 'micro' levels. In 2019, Transparency International ranked Syria 178th of 180 countries on its index[49] of least corrupt countries, which confirmed the civil war actually worsened the (already high) level of corruption in the country.

Depleted service provision has also been an important aspect of the Syrian state's failure. When the civil war broke out, the CIA estimated 1.6 million Syrians did not have access to electricity.[50] In the years of the war and during the siege of eastern Aleppo in 2016, shelling and concussive missiles targeted densely populated areas and water institutions (Bab al-Nairab electric station and the water company in Suleiman al-Halaby neighbourhood) and transformers that played a vital role in power supply.[51] The war and complete destruction of most conflict regions resulted in the loss of a large part of the country's electricity infrastructure.[52] Statistics also published by the UN in 2016, which covered the preceding five years, suggested 12.1 million experienced water scarcity.[53] For example, in October 2017, the villages of Wadi Barada, Damascus's main water source, were violently besieged by *shabiha* and Hezbollah, resulting in the substantial destruction of infrastructure and water from the Ein Al Fejeh spring being cut off.[54] The UN added 2.5 million were food insecure and 1.5 million still required access to shelters and life-saving facilities. In March 2017, the World Bank claimed that between half and 80 percent of the public and service sector in Aleppo, Hama and Idlib was out of service.[55]

State failure was also shown in the inability of the health and education sectors to meet public needs. The collapse of the health system impacted all Syrians. For example, in the Damascus countryside, mothers die from a lack of health care, poor services and environmental pollution, while the polluted waters of the Barada River expose them to further health risks.[56] The Regime also targeted hospitals and health facilities—in May 2016, it was believed to have done this on 454 occasions.[57] In the education part, the UN report estimated that, in 2016, 11.5 million Syrians needed health care and 13.5 million required humanitarian support.[58] The UN estimated that, in the period 2011–16, around 5.7 million children required educational assistance and about 2.7 million had no access to schools and education.[59]

Territories loss and the strategy of displacement

The Fund for Peace asserted that, "the state is failing when its government is losing physical control of its territory or lacks a monopoly on the legitimate use of force".[60]

Conflict occurs on various levels, including between and within states, and there is a prevailing atmosphere of confusion and internal division.[61] After the uprising, the State was confronted by various combinations of internal revolt and external intervention. The Regime's response caused what had been localized protests to spiral into a major uprising. In the stage of state failure, violence is embodied in various forms of conflict (including ethnic and religious) that are invariably driven by a fear of the 'other'.[62] In Syria, the sectarian character of the conflict has become increasingly pronounced since the rise of ISIS in 2013, and as a result, ethnic and religious divisions have become increasingly prominent.[63] A 'security dilemma' has emerged as both sides deploy defensive tactics that increase insecurity. Extremists who advocate pre-emptive violence against other communities are empowered and communal identity supersedes other identities. In an increasingly insecure environment, activities such as arms smuggling and plunder enable armed organizations to obtain required equipment and meet logistical needs.[64]

It is the enduring character, and not absolute intensity, of violence that identifies a failed state. In associated civil wars, something akin to sect cleansing occurs in 'mixed' areas. The fear of the 'other' also becomes a key factor in hostilities between privileged (i.e., Regime-aligned) and subordinate groups.[65] The (failed) State is in the background, and influences these interactions and relations. Kalyvas observed how the deliberate targeting of civilians, including displacement, emerges as a tactic,[66] takes the form of indirect and psychological violence. Assad used a sectarian discourse to generate minority solidarity, and denounced protestors in the strongest of terms.[67] He claimed the opposition were "led by armed gangs, criminals and sectarian jihadists "and were supported by external forces.[68] The Regime achieved its aims through a number of means, which include bombing, siege, starvation and massacres, which have deployed in a number of governorates, including Damascus, Eastern and Western Ghouta, Eastern Aleppo, Homs, Idlib and the rural areas to the north of Hama). Displacement has, in particular, emerged as one of the most effective ways of dividing the state, rooting out populations and preventing the expansion of Opposition enclaves.

In the case of Homs, it was a focus for targeted Regime violence that tried to create and drive displacement, provides insight into the Regime's application of each method, and is also a particularly instructive case because it illustrates the Regime's general demographic engineering and, more specifically, its attempts to alter the Alawite-Sunni balance. Furthermore, it also underlines and reiterates that such atrocities are invariably underpinned by a clear strategic rationale and purpose. The Regime used heavy artillery to indiscriminately bomb entire Sunni neighbourhoods, and in just two months (January-February 2012) displaced 50,000–60,000 inhabitants from some Homs neighbourhoods.[69] Homs was one of the long-established part of the Regime's 'Useful Syria' project', that it lies between the coast (a Regime stronghold), Damascus and rural Damascus, and is also part of supply lines that extend from Lebanon. As a result of Regime activities, the governorate's population fell by more than 42 percent (from 1,803,000 in 2011 to 1,052,000 five years later).[70]

The Regime committed many massacres in Homs, most notably in the Khalidiya neighbourhoods 2 December 2012,[71] when it's bombing destroyed more than 34 apartments, partially destroyed many others and killed at least fifty people.[72] On 11 February 2012, Regime militia also carried out a massacre in Al-Sabil neighbourhood,

in which entire families were stabbed to death.[73] In the Karm Alzaytoun massacre on 9–11 March 2012, 47 civilians were murdered and their bodies were then mutilated with knives.[74] This was followed by the notorious Houla (Tel Taldo) massacre on 25 May 2012, when Regime security forces killed 108, with children[75] (39) and women (32) accounting for more than half this number. The international community strongly responded and condemned this atrocity, and the U.S and some European countries[76] expelled Syrian ambassadors.[77] The Regime also used starvation tactics as a form of collective punishment. Electricity and water supplies were cut off and relief material were prevented from arriving. The situation in the city began to seriously deteriorate after a year of the war, and olives and weeds became the main means of subsistence.[78] In failed states, the government loses large parts of the state to other 'ethnic' and 'sectarian' factions. As a result, states become one among a number of conflict parties. Factions seize cities and towns, and crime and violence increase as citizens leave in the search of a safe place. The social contract breaks down and citizens no longer trust the state, and instead turn to communal alternatives that offer a default economic opportunity. Allegiances are then transferred to clan and group leaders.

The repercussion of regional and international intervention for destabilization

The intervention of external actors, whether Iran, Russia or other militias, has generated millions of displaced persons. The implications and consequences of this aspect of state failure extend to neighbouring states. [79] Proximate civil wars present a new series of challenges, including the movement of combatants, non- combatants and arms across state boundaries.[80] This is perhaps one of the main reasons why external actors so frequently intervene in 'internal' conflicts, whether with the aim of exerting influence or bringing it to an end. In the Syrian case, external actors have perpetuated the war for their own purposes, and have accordingly provided local proxies with sufficient arms to keep fighting but not prevail. In the process of intervention, countries will almost inevitably engage with questions of grand strategy, which Blechman & Kaplan define as upholding the credibility of commitments to allies, preventing the spread of an ideology and sending a message about the overarching aims of foreign policy.[81] The strategy should identify the target, set out the schedule of intervention and guide the application of force.[82] A number of domestic political and personal motivations, including a leader's desire to increase political power, should also be taken into account.[83] For example, Ziadeh argues that the conflict has been perpetuated by various circuits of power that connect 'stable' spaces to conflict and establish 'overlapping cartographies of militarization'.[84]

Erdogan's 'neo-Ottoman adventurism' has resulted in the Turkish government becoming increasingly involved in the affairs of its immediate neighbours. Ankara's support for the Opposition and some Islamist groups (al- Sham Corps) has underlined its desire to remove al-Assad from power. Turkey facilitated the delivery of arms and tolerated the inflow of foreign jihadists into Syria, many of whom later joined groups such as ISIS and HTS.[85] While Turkey believed the 'Arab Spring' could be used to establish a regional order it could dominate,[86] the complexity of the conflict inside the country and the Russia presence were not amenable to its interests.[87] On 26 August 2016,

it announced the beginning of 'Euphrates Shield Operation', which sought to create a secure corridor in the space between the Turkish border and the town of Al-Bab in Aleppo.[88] Erdogan believed Turkey would need to be present on the ground if it was to influence future developments in the country.[89] This operation targeted ISIS while later ones, including 'Operation Peace Spring' targeted Kurds in the north of the country. In January 2018, Turkey launched the 'Olive Branch Operation', which entered into the Afrin region in Aleppo, and then in November 2019, it launched 'Peace Spring'. This 'security' and 'preventive' operations sought to curtail Kurdish advances into northern Syria and to use military checkpoints to establish control.[90] Both of Erdogan's 'security 'objectives were eventually achieved. As part of its 'de-escalation' intervention, Turkey connected the Euphrates Shield area with the western region of the Aleppo countryside.

Turkey supported the opposition, while Iran have supported the Regime by deploying a small number of IRGC advisers almost immediately after the start of the war, and later by enabling other foreign Shia militants[91] to travel to the country and fight alongside Regime forces.[92] It also, along with Hezbollah, improved the resources available to the Regime and provided tactical and strategic assistance. It spearheaded the creation of the National Defence Force, a collection of domestic local paramilitaries who were more disciplined than the unruly *Shabiha*, and supplemented the military effort by providing checkpoints and local security. Iran's strategic 'pivot' had several incentives. First, the Regime was a key bridge to deliver weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon.[93] Second, Syria was close to Israel and the oPt, and direct involvement would enable it to strengthen its ties with Palestinian groups, most notably Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas, whose political wing was headquartered in Damascus. Third, Syria would function as an 'outer wall' of defence for Iraq which had, after the 2003 U.S-led invasion, become one of Tehran's closest allies and trading partners. Finally, it also viewed the country as being of significant symbolic religious value.[94]

As part of a general trend of internationalization, Russia's post-2015 intervention in the war had an important influence on its direction and final outcome. Analysts suggest that its roots can be traced back to Putin's geopolitical views. The Russian army bases in Damascus, the naval military base in Tartus and the air base in Latakia are all clearly important in this regard. Putin's analysis of the Syrian war and the wider 'Arab Spring' are also distinctively Orientalist. He attributes the 'Arab Spring' to Islamic rather than democratic forces, and contends that the multi-ethnic Syrian society is only held in place by a strong Regime. For him, it is also a way of denying the U.S any influence in the country—as Philips notes, 'the key word for Moscow is not "Assad" but "intervention"' (2016, p. 95).[95] In the later stages of the war, these concerns have been supplanted by a focus on Idlib, which Russia views as harbouring an international terrorism that threatens its long-term interests and priorities (Harris 2018, pp167–169).[96]

During the process of intervention, a range of internal influences will act on U.S foreign policy, and the interaction between different branches, including the State Department and Pentagon, is particularly important in this respect.[97] Obama's non-ideological approach enabled him to overcome these tensions to some extent, as he was able to address issues on the basis of a case-by-case approach that upheld U.S interests.[98] He viewed Syria as an appropriate place to pursue some sort of rapprochement with Iran and Russia; some sort of agreement with Assad would also help to ensure that the eastward flow of Jihadist would not recommence.[99] The Regime's (alleged) use of

chemical weapons in the civil war was a clear obstacle. The largest number of deaths was caused by an 21 August 2013 nerve gas attack, which, according to the U.S government, resulted in over 1,400 deaths (2018). The threat of U.S-led military action was only offset when Russia proposed an agreement that would remove Assad's chemical weapons capability.[100] International outrage and condemnation, the issue of chemical weapons returned to the centre of the international agenda. However, this attack on the Al-Shayrat air base, which Pentagon believed was used to store missiles that could be used for chemical attacks, was essentially symbolic.[101] When Trump entered the White House, the U.S continued to maintain that its position on the original would not change. The plan that Rex Tillerson, the U.S Secretary of State, outlined with the aim of preventing ISIS from re-emerging, emphasized both reconstruction and stabilization.[102] His plan addressed the concerns of key allies (most notably Turkey) and tried to identify how the Syrian government could be pressurized to engage in meaningful negotiations. Also the U.S developing a strategic focus that had been manifestly lacking throughout the conflict.[103]

The crucial requirements for Syria, the failed state

A lasting peace requires a sustained engagement with themes of legitimacy, social improvement, economic development, and political participation. However, it is important not to reduce 'peace' to any one of these constitutive elements as, in important respects; it stands apart and above them. Peace also implies a closer and more sustained with the roots and sources of violent conflict.[104] Peace strategies should identify local root causes of conflict, local capacities for change, the persistence of war-related hostility and the (net) degree of international commitment that can be used to assist change. By implication, it is not the responsibility of one state or the international community to rebuild a society. This is due to the importance of legitimacy, which is collective consent to rule: a ruler therefore possesses authority when directives and laws are understood by subordinates as binding on all members of the relevant community.[105] Legitimacy exists when constraints on individual action are not just produced by the ruler's coercive power but also by the collectivity of subordinates. Accordingly, while consent is collectively voluntary, it is individually binding and mandatory.[106] Quick and visible results are essential to build legitimacy among the population. This will build confidence in the new government. This 'reset' is seen as an opportunity to push through a broad set of economic, political and social reforms.

Much of the infrastructure—schools, clinics, roads, water supply, power, irrigation—is usually destroyed by the war and/or in disrepair from neglect, and so quick infrastructural rehabilitation is given priority under the rubric of 'delivering quick and visible results'. Government capacity in post-conflict situations is invariably weak or even non-existent, and this is addressed through the provision of various forms of 'technical assistance' that are accompanied by the rewriting of the constitution, the framing of key laws and the holding of elections. Social reforms can also be introduced such as the protection of minority rights. International actors usually initially focus on brokering a new national government and helping the new government gain legitimacy by establishing security and promoting economic development. Economic reforms promote free markets and establish the basis for an open economy. In recent years, security assistance

has often involved the insertion of multi-national peacekeeping forces, although it can also involve support for the establishment of the army and the national police. International assistance for economic development, which is most often co-ordinated by the United Nations and the World Bank, can also complement security assistance intended to 'consolidate' the peace. Weak government capacity and the partial or complete absence of governance institutions can also necessitate the use of 'alternative delivery mechanisms', such as contractors, UN or bilateral agencies, and/or domestic and foreign NGOs, to channel aid.[107]

Conclusion

State 'failure' and 'weakness' have become established parts of the international policy-making 'toolkit', and their referent objects, connotations and implications are clearly understood and grasped by international actors. In applying both terms in a range of contexts they have established a common framework of reference that operates above and beyond individual contexts. In their established and recognized usage, both terms have been understood in relation to states that have experienced violent conflict and the different stages of the conflict process (pre, during and post). Although not exclusively, the terms have been applied to states that are either experiencing or recovering from large-scale violent conflict, and therefore in relation to established practices such as peacekeeping and peacebuilding. The case of Syria is particularly interesting as it does not correspond to the terms 'weak' or 'failing' in all respects. For example, the country was by no means the first in the region that observers may have, during the 'Arab Spring', presupposed to be on the cusp of a violent civil war: various other candidates were more foremost in this respect. Indeed, the outbreak of the conflict could hardly be attributed to the sudden deterioration of state capacity or the abrupt collapse of state institutions. Instead, it was more clearly due to the Regime's attempts to crush a peaceful uprising by using force—although there were a variety of contributing factors it was this, in the last analysis, that sparked the civil war.

However, the state's 'strength', or more precisely its ability to repress, was ultimately superficial as the basis of state authority rested on shallow foundations and lacked popular support; in addition, its style of governance was distinctively 'sectarian' and state structures were 'hollowed out' by pervasive corruption. Even efforts to 'modernize' or 'reform' (and here it should be remembered that Bashar al-Assad was originally 'sold' to Syrian and international audiences in precisely these terms) functioned to reinforce and perpetuate this exclusionary political settlement which, in the last analysis, could only be sustained through repression and the (implied or actual) use of force. State failure and weakness were therefore established parts of the country's political arrangement, and the ostensible appearance of state strength could hardly conceal the fact that the state was vulnerable to a broad-based uprising that included Alawites and other 'advantaged' minorities. In other words, every assertion of state authority through direct repression was an inadvertent and implicit acknowledgement that it lacked both legitimacy and more subtle means through which to assert its authority. There was no social contract and the heavy-handed governance that served as an implicit acknowledgement of this would ultimately contribute to the outbreak of the civil war.

The bulk of this article has however focused on state failure and weakness that occurred as a *result* of the conflict. In this regard, the 'failure' of the Syrian state has emerged as a self-evident fact, and has embodied in the loss of sovereignty and the seizure of large parts of its territory by 'terrorist' actors that have effectively functioned as quasi states. This replacement of the state authority has provided the most conspicuous evidence of Syrian state failure. However, this has not only been demonstrated by the Opposition, as international actors who have come to the 'aid' of the Regime, including sectarian militias and Hezbollah, have further underlined the weakness of the Syrian state. The extent of Opposition gains, including in Damascus, further indicate that the state's capacity to repress and impose its authority had substantially degraded. Indeed, the breadth of popular opposition to the Regime in the initial stages of the uprising was striking and was clearly acknowledged by the Regime in its application of a sectarian policy that deliberately sought to create divides and animosities between different groups. The adoption of this specific 'survival strategy' was, in other words, an implicit acknowledgement of the Regime's weak basis of social legitimacy.

The country's post-conflict peacebuilding process will have to be acknowledged, or the Regime will simply re-establish a basis for future conflict. The root causes of the conflict must be addressed, and more inclusive governance practices and structures must emerge that provide a basis for meaningful popular participation in the running of the country's affairs. Infrastructural reconstruction will need to require international assistance, but the re-negotiation of this social contract must be an internal affair, that acknowledges and addresses the grievances of a wide range of conflict actors. The internationalization of the conflict also did this. During the conflict, Israel has conducted itself with relative constraint, and has conducted limited attacks on Hezbollah fighters within the country and has provided indirect assistance to jihadists fighting the Assad regime in areas close to the Golan Heights. However, it has not directly intervened in the conflict in support of a particular conflict actor, as the continuation of the war drains adversaries on all sides, and most notably the Assad regime. However, Israel's limited engagement has not impacted the extent or form of state failure in Syria.

The fact that both Russia and the U.S were able to operate in the country underlined the extent to which the Syrian state's authority had degraded. Indeed, some activists refer to the Russian involvement as an 'invasion', and thereby acknowledge the extent to which the Regime's ability to uphold the sanctity of its own territory had effectively evaporated. However, this overlooks the fact that Russia was invited to intervene by the internationally recognized government of Syria. The U.S, in contrast, was not invited and began operating in the country under its own auspices. Without the support of Iran, Russia and Hezbollah, the Regime would have almost certainly collapsed.

The extent of the displacement of the country's population, both internally and externally, is a further confirmation of state failure. And here it should be recognized that this is in part a protection failure on the part of the Regime as a number of the displaced are minorities who were forced to relocate, and were worst affected in terms of reported deaths, sexual violence, and poverty and malnutrition. However, here it should be noted that the Regime (as well as the Opposition) has sought to use displacement as a way of achieving its military aims and objectives. In addition, it is also important to recognize the objective indicators that correspond to, and serve as confirmation of, state weakness and failure. Rapid economic decline, huge demographic decreases and growing

food insecurity are now long-established trends in the country, and clearly have the potential to 'feedback' into conflict and instability. Basic food items such as bread are still rationed; foreign sanctions inflicted $300 billion (USD) of damage on the country's economy in the period 2011–20. However, here it should be remembered that the Syrian regime has, with the exception of the early 1990s, been viewed and treated as a 'rogue state' and threat to regional and even international security for a substantial period of time. Viewed as a pre-eminent state sponsor of terrorism and a direct obstacle to U.S aspirations and visions in the region, it was once labelled as part of George Bush's (jnr) infamous axis of evil. A substantial of the Regime's domestic legitimacy has rested upon its opposition to international interference in the region and in particular to U.S/ Israeli interventions in the region. Resulting hardships have therefore been widely perceived as part of the cost of standing at the vanguard of Arab 'resistance'. Over time, the Regime has built up resilience to external pressure, and this should taken into account when considering the impact of sanctions during the course of the war.

In economic, political and social terms, the Syrian state is a failed state. Somewhat ironically, its continued existence as a state indirectly affirms this, as this was only enabled by extensive international support: the extent and scope of international involvement further underlines and reiterates that the Syrian state is unable to sustain itself. The suppression of civil protests by the military and disciplinary forces led Syria into a crisis that led to a war against everyone. In this context, religious groups, especially jihadist currents, found the space appropriate to grow and paved the way for the promotion of religious violence in the country. This situation saw the rise of Salafi and radical jihadist groups such as ISIL, al-Qaeda and al-Nusra, and other armed actors. These groups have been the most important cause of the escalation of violence and war, and have in turn exacerbated conditions of state failure in the country.

Notes

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Disclosure statement