



## King's Research Portal

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Berdal, M. (2019). Il mito dello "spazio non governato" – alcune implicazioni per lo state-building e la sicurezza umana. *Human Security*. <https://www.twai.it/magazines/governance-e-istituzioni-al-di-la-dello-stato/>

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

[To be published in translation in *Human Security*, 2019]

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

Mats Berdal

### Western Anxiety about “Ungoverned Spaces”

Heightened anxiety in the West about “ungoverned territories” as possible “breeding grounds for terrorism and criminal activities and launching pads for attacks against the United States and Western interests”<sup>1</sup> was a direct consequence of the events and aftermath of “9/11”. The analysis and dominant policy prescriptions proposed for dealing with the challenge of “ungoverned spaces”, however, can be traced further back in time; specifically to the “state failure” debates of the 1990s when many Western analysts and policy makers came to view the “building” of modern liberal states along Weberian lines as *the* solution to the scourge of civil war and deep-seated conflict in the post-Cold War era. In fact, while the underlying motives for engaging with “failed states” in the 1990s and “ungoverned space” after 2001 may have differed, the *diagnosis* of the core challenge that needed to be addressed rested on fundamentally similar assumptions. What were these?

Both the notion of “state failure” and “ungoverned space” reflect, whether implicitly or explicitly, what may, crudely summarised, be described as the Weberian conception of the State, of the legal-rational bases of legitimate authority and of the proper source of political order. Central to this is the understanding of the State as a geographically circumscribed entity within which, through a set of formal institutions, it exercises a “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical violence in the enforcement of its order”, and over which it asserts a monopoly of governance and rule-making. With these powers, the State generates *legitimacy* through the provision of public goods, foremost among them protection and security. Where these conditions are critically weakened - whether from the effects of war or a slow hollowing out from within - legitimacy seeps away, political order disintegrates and States may, in extremis, “collapse” leaving behind “ungoverned territories”. Exogenous state-building, as

---

<sup>1</sup> Rabassa, Angel, et. al., *Ungoverned Territories – Understanding and Reducing Terrorism Risks*, RAND Report, 2007 ([https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2007/RAND\\_MG561.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2007/RAND_MG561.pdf))

attempted in Afghanistan between 2003 and 2014, may be viewed as an attempt by outsiders to build or reconstitute States in order to prevent the descent into “ungovernability”, or, put more positively (as would have been the case in the discourse of the 1990s), help lay the foundations for lasting peace and improvements in human security. Either way, state-building thus conceived rests on a mechanical, technocratic understanding of state failure. To borrow the words of a well-known English nursery rhyme, the aim of state-building is to “put humpty dumpty back together again”.

Now, while superficially compelling in the abstract, the actual experience of “post-conflict” peace- and state-building over the past three decades has brought the *limits* of the aforementioned understanding of the State, and of the purposes state-building, into sharp relief, especially so in relation to war-torn and deeply divided, but also historically and culturally distinctive, societies and regions. Specifically, the experience has shown that the simple notion of “ungoverned space” – an evocative phrase often used to conjure up visions of a *Mad Max* world of savagery, chaos and anarchy – is in fact profoundly unhelpful, analytically as well as in purely empirical terms. In reality, what Western policy makers have routinely described as “ungoverned spaces” – whether along the Pakistani-Afghan border, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel or the Venezuelan-Colombian border – are *not* devoid of *governance*, even though they are located in areas where the reach and authority of *central government* are plainly weak and fragmented. In order to consider some of the implications of this for exogenous state-building and human security, it is necessary to revisit the complex and transformative impact of war and conflict on societies.

### The effects of War and Protracted Conflict on State and Governance

While invariably destructive in human and material terms, war is also an agent of transformation that serves to reorder relationships of power and influence within State and society. This is one reason why the idea that States subjected to war and violence simply collapse into “chaos” or “ungoverned space” conceals a much more complex reality. As ethnographic and other studies of conflict zones have repeatedly shown, those who live within war-torn and fragile states – that is, those who live in conditions of persistent insecurity and endemic violence where *formal* institutions of State and government are weak to non-existent – are never indifferent in relation to

the circumstances in which they find themselves. Politico-military elites and power-brokers, economic interest groups and civil society actors (including traders, local businesses and women's groups), "ordinary" people concerned with coping and survival: *all* of them adapt and find ways of adjusting to the realities created by war and persistent State weakness.

Now, strategies of adjustment can be primarily *predatory* in nature, geared towards personal enrichment through the capturing of criminal rent and/or the exploitation of vulnerable civilian populations through pillaging and various forms of illegal and violent taxation. And indeed, in some cases, the criminal interests and activities of the political-military elites in power actually come to depend, in symbiotic fashion, on the continuation of State weakness and the lack of properly functioning and accountable institutions.

Strategies of adjustment can also, however, be less about predation than about taking the necessary steps required to *survive* and *cope* in a world where the State no longer provides security, effective rule and basic life-sustaining services. Indeed, the response of local communities to state fragility and insecurity has often been to create informal arrangements which, over time, have crystallised into local, even regional, systems of "governance without government"<sup>2</sup>; systems which in turn may provide the basis for more durable political settlements owing to the greater legitimacy they enjoy and to their ability better to meet the human security needs of war-weary populations. As René Lemarchand observed of Eastern Congo in 2013: "Uneven as the results are ... informal forms of governance appear to hold considerably more promise than the frequently and largely corrupt 'democratic' institutions put in place through elections".<sup>3</sup> Evidence from other cases have, similarly, pointed to the emergence of alternative political orders and systems of governance in zones of conflict. This includes Afghanistan where Ashley Jackson has documented how the Taliban's "battle for popular support" since 2014 has grown "into a sophisticated governance structure, including the management of schools, clinics, courts, tax collection, and more."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Ken Menkhaus, "Governance without Government in Somalia: Spoilers, State Building and the Politics of Coping", *International Security*, Vol. 31, no.3 (Winter 2007).

<sup>3</sup> René Lemarchand, "Reflections on the Recent Historiography of Eastern Congo", *The Journal of African History*, vol.54, no.3, 2013, p.436.

<sup>4</sup> Ashley Jackson, "The Taliban's Fight for Hearts and Minds", *Foreign Policy*, 12 September 2018.

### **Implications for Policy-Making: The importance of applying a political economy lens**

Systems of governance that emerge in response to conditions of war and acute state weakness should not necessarily – even though they are often approvingly referred to as “organic”, “bottom-up” and “authentic” processes - be treated as the most promising basis for building peace and addressing human security needs. Plainly, as indicated above, local adaptations to state failure and insecurity can also be, and have often proved to be, exploitative, violent and illiberal. More often than not, the calculations and motives of local actors are likely to be *complex* and *mixed*, reflecting their particular circumstances and thus resisting easy labelling – a reality that emerges clearly from studies of the war in Afghanistan as viewed from the perspective of local Afghans.<sup>5</sup> The key point here – and also a key lesson for policy makers – is that violent conflict and continuing state weakness, rather than simply being viewed as manifestations of “anarchy”, must also be understood as a distinctive political economy of war and peace; one given by the range of interests that apply and the functional utility that some see in their perpetuation. In other words, what needs to be analysed and better understood are the alternative systems of power, influence and economic activity that crystallise within conflict zones, and, more specifically, the interaction of local war economies with the political agendas of conflict actors.

This is no easy task, not least because political economies mutate and change, often rapidly in response to external and internal stimuli, including evolving regional and geopolitical circumstances. Moreover, while analytical capacity to better understand the dynamics of war zones and fragile states has improved within the machinery of Western governments responsible engagement in “post conflict” settings, bureaucratic stove-piping and limited political attention span among senior decision makers will always complicate the task of translating analysis into meaningful policy. For all this, policy-makers wishing to assist in creating conditions that stand a chance of enhancing human security in conflict zones have no option but to engage with the political economy of conflict-affected states, societies and regions. The value of political economy analyses, as Suhrke, Goodhand and Bose observe, is that it helps to “de-construct and denaturalise the idea of the Weberian state, blurring the binary

---

<sup>5</sup> Carter Malkasian, *War Comes to Garmser – Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier* (London: Hurst & Co., 2013).

distinctions between state and non-state, legitimate and illegitimate, and highlighting the networks, coalitions and material foundations that underpin or undermine the state.”<sup>6</sup> Even if such analysis does not provide clear-cut, let alone politically digestible, answers in terms of how best, if at all, to intervene, it directs decision-makers towards the *kinds* of questions that must nonetheless be asked. These include: In what ways have war and protracted violence contributed to the growth of informal networks and how resilient are these? Where does *real* power – that is, networks of privilege and patronage that have evolved during conflict – lie in “post-conflict” states? Which informal practices and actors can be recognised and formalised without threat to overall long-term political stability? What is the risk that exogenous state-building initiatives will, rather than securing improvements in human security, only serve entrench the power and influence of actors with a vested interest in weak states and continuing instability?

### **Implications for Approaches to State-Building**

The analysis above has sought to highlight how civil war and state weakness typically transform social, economic and political bases of power within society, resulting in the emergence of alternative political and economic orders where effective power has shifted to informal networks of privilege and patronage. It follows from this that strengthening war-torn States and improving human security should never be viewed primarily as a challenge of building institutional capacity. The deeper challenge lies in finding and effectively supporting a political settlement that reflects and takes account of the formal as well as the informal distribution of power, influence and resources within society. The notion of a political settlement here should not be confused with the formal signing of a peace accord, even though such accords ideally should and, on occasion, have been underpinned by common, less formal, understandings of the *rules* forged among social groups, actors and, especially, among the elites that govern, organise and regulate access to power and resources within society. Reaching a political settlement means agreement on those “rules”, and making the search for such settlement more central to the activities of external actors engaged in state and peace-

---

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Goodhand, Astri Suhrke & Srinjoy Bose (2016) “Flooding the lake? International democracy promotion and the political economy of the 2014 presidential election in Afghanistan”, *Conflict, Security & Development*, 16:6,p.485.

building means shifting focus away from institutional capacity *as such* to the underlying structures of power and influence in society. This, in turn, necessarily entails a broader conception of the “state” to include informal actors and networks that have prospered in the course of conflict and have sometimes benefited from persistent state weakness. This is essential because a functioning and inclusive political settlement – one in which key actors and elites see themselves as having a long-term stake – rather than just state capacity is necessary for building legitimacy across society for any new “post-conflict” dispensation. Focusing merely on formal institutions and the edifice of the state, in other words, can divert attention away from the importance of considering relationships between different and actors groups in society and how these experience the state, including their sense of political and economic disenfranchisement, grievance and marginalisation. Considering those relationships is also the key to addressing the legacies of human insecurity.

**Mats Berdal** is Professor of Security and Development in the Department of War Studies, King’s College London, where he is also the Director of the Conflict, Security and Development Research Programme (CSDRG).