



## Reconceptualizing State Building in Africa (I): Non-State Systems, Decentralization and Refounding African Statehood

by Mark Massey Jr.

State building is asserted as the remedy to state collapse. It is heralded as both an immediate solution to contemporary collapse and the preventive medicine against future collapse. It has ascended to a new level of importance in the post-9/11 era. Analysts deem failed states more of a threat to international security than powerful, hegemonic ones, reflecting one prominent scholar's observation that "chaos has replaced tyranny as the new challenge" of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Yet, state building is exceedingly difficult and complex; its track record is mixed at best. This series of four articles, under the heading of "Reconceptualizing State Building in Africa," aims to provide a reconceptualization of state building. This introduction lays out the arguments to follow in the proceeding articles, in order to provide a roadmap connecting the arch of the overall series.

The troublesome record has as much to do with how we misconceive state *collapse* (the problem) as how we conceive state *building* (the solution). Thus the first article, "Start by Rethinking State Collapse," critiques the traditional theories of state collapse and offers an alternative way of understanding it. It presents seven key points—the seven deadly sins of state collapse theory. Some of these points identify erroneous assumptions and misunderstandings that must be shed, and some of these points suggest new ways to look at the issue. The traditional theories are constrained by state-centric dogmas of political science that oversimplify the problem (and thus solution). By adopting a multi-disciplined understanding that incorporates lessons from anthropology, sociology and conflict economics, we develop a more comprehensive understanding of why states fail—and how to rebuild them.

The second article, "The Unbearable Lightness of Governance," argues for a fundamental reconsideration of traditional state building approaches. The standard centralized, top-down strategy is counter-productive. Instead, efforts must cultivate bottom-up, decentralized approaches based on fostering local governance.

The third article, "Below and Beyond the State," explores the implications of non-state systems (i.e. non-state structures, networks and complexes that provide economic, social and/or political services in cases of state collapse/failure). The emergence of such systems is an overlooked and under-researched trend. Analysts typically dismiss them as temporary, criminal offshoots of anarchy. But this is premature and erroneous. These systems must be understood as emerging orders that challenge fundamental assumptions about state-society relations. While some are oppressive and violent, others are peaceful and democratic. We must stop ignoring them and start tracking them. The article looks at Somaliland (Northern Somalia) as a case study.

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<sup>1</sup> Ignatieff (2003), p. 299

Though Somalia is assumed to be a zone of violent anarchy, Somaliland's non-state system of "governance without government" is organically evolving from the bottom-up. It is surprisingly peaceful and democratic with "high levels of legitimacy and local ownership" capable of providing significant levels of governance, public security and social services.<sup>2</sup> It is striking how, in the absence of international support and recognition, Somaliland's bottom-up, organic, democratic peace stands in stark contrast to the violent, internationally-led, top-down state building failures in Southern Somalia. There are other similar cases across Africa. Thus far we have ignored them to our own detriment. However, they could prove to be building blocks for rejuvenating legitimate, stable and representative governments in Africa.

The fourth article, "Lessons for State Building," identifies the lessons and implications for state building. While the previous articles focused on the "why," it focuses on the "how." It suggests ways to incorporate these lessons and apply them to the design and on-the-ground implementation of state building missions.

As a collective, these articles are meant to open new perspectives urging state builders to craft nuanced approaches that fuse internationally assisted, top-down methods with organic, bottom-up reconstruction.

### ***Part One: Start by Rethinking State Collapse***

State building is asserted as the remedy to state collapse. It is heralded as both an immediate solution to contemporary collapse and the preventive medicine against future collapse. It has ascended to a new level of importance in the post-9/11 era. Analysts deem failed states more of a threat to international security than powerful, hegemonic ones, reflecting one prominent scholar's observation that "chaos has replaced tyranny as the new challenge" of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> Yet state building is exceedingly difficult and complex; its track record is mixed at best. Its troublesome record has as much to do with how we misconceive state *collapse* (the problem) as how we conceive state *building* (the solution).

Simply put, the way we think about state collapse and state building is wrong. We must fundamentally change our approach to these issues. That is the main goal of this series of articles. This first article focuses on state *collapse*, and argues 1) why the dominant interpretations of collapse are flawed and 2) what we can do to better understand collapse. It presents seven key points—the seven deadly sins of state collapse theory. Some of these points identify erroneous assumptions and misunderstandings that must be shed, and some of these points suggest new ways to look at the issue. Together they present a "reconceptualization" of state collapse.

A starting point is to understand what we mean by the term "state" and how we measure its "success" or "failure." The basic purpose of a modern state is to provide: 1) *security* while maintaining a monopoly of violence (law and order and international defense); 2) *representation* (a process connecting people to their government); and 3) *welfare* (the provision of social and economic services funded through taxes).<sup>4</sup> How effectively the government fulfils these core functions defines the success or failure of the state. So how can we better our understanding of collapse?

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<sup>2</sup> Menkhaus (2006/2007)

<sup>3</sup> Ignatieff (2003), p. 299

<sup>4</sup> Milliken & Krause (2002)

## The Seven Deadly Sins of State Collapse Theory

### 1. Consider context and do not oversimplify.

Many theories oversimplify state collapse by placing too much emphasis on a single, all-encompassing cause. For example, you will often hear that “globalization” has eroded the power of the state and made weak states even more fragile. Or that the end of the Cold War halted the US/Soviet funding of puppet regimes that were too weak to stand on their own, thus opening Pandora boxes of “ancient ethnic hatreds.” The search for such causes is helpful, but to extrapolate a single, all-encompassing causality oversimplifies this complex phenomenon. Most cases of collapse have international *and* domestic causes. Universal explanations only tell part of the story. Each case is different; similar causes do not mean similar results and visa versa. Moreover, such explanations fail to account for cultural, ideological and personal motives (e.g. honor, prestige, fear, pride) that are “instinctively uncomfortable” to social science.<sup>5</sup> Instead, we must adopt more context sensitive perspectives stressing that there are “quite distinct patterns of, and *different and contrasted trajectories to*, collapse.”<sup>6</sup>

### 2. Avoid the “great power bias.”

When studying the history, politics and societies of Africa, one must take care not to perpetuate the “great power bias” that often distorts our analyses. The traditional academic theories of international relations and security studies (realism, liberalism, Marxism, etc.) explain history through the actions of the big governments of great power countries: how this government reacted to that government and so on. The state is the basic character through which history is told. But this framework provides distorted, incomplete understandings of history and is less effective when looking at areas of the world where the state is a relatively new, weak and ineffective (even non-existent) entity.

Political scientists Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey provide an excellent argument for how this kind of great power bias (which they call “Eurocentrism”) distorts our understanding of the “developing” world. This Eurocentrism “renders invisible” the “interconnection” and “mutual constitution” of both the West and East—or what Thomas Barnett would call the “Core” and the “Gap.”<sup>7</sup> In actuality, the two share a “joint role in making history” and must be analyzed in a “single analytic field.”<sup>8</sup> When we explain history, we tend to focus on the actions of the big governments of the powerful states (i.e. the great power bias). The problem is that this relegates the weak, powerless states and non-state actors (i.e. governments and peoples of developing countries) as marginal, passive actors whose impact on history is trivial. In so doing, these analyses commit a “categorical error” that “underestimates and misrepresents” the impacts, roles

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<sup>5</sup> Berdal (2003), p. 490

<sup>6</sup> Doornbos (2002), p. 799

<sup>7</sup> Barkawi & Laffey (2006), pp. 346-7. To clarify, the terms “West and East” are synonyms for, respectively, “North and South,” “developed and developing,” or, in Barnett’s terms, “the Core and the Gap.”

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 330

and motives of these actors.<sup>9</sup> Before 9/11, our security analysis was tailored towards analyzing threats from the big governments of the great power countries (e.g. USSR, China, etc.) while viewing weaker countries and non-state actors as “small potatoes.” We did not fully understand the role minor states and non-state actors played in history. We thus misunderstood the forces behind terrorism, fragile states and “new wars.” This is why events like 9/11 caught us so off-guard.

This type of great power analysis is particularly problematic when it comes to understanding places like Africa and Southwest Asia, where the “state” has never been a strong institution. Trying to analyze the histories and societies of these regions by focusing on their governments misses much of the story. Much of what “happens” in Africa—both in the historical sense and the daily life sense—“happens” outside of the government. But traditional approaches of political science, international relations and security studies analyze history by focusing on state governments. You cannot approach African history in this way because it creates a distorted, incomplete view. Two Africa experts have similarly remarked, “it seems to be the enduring fate of Africa to be ‘explained’ in terms so ahistorical as to be risible.”<sup>10</sup>

In today’s security paradigm, the role of minor states (e.g. Afghanistan, Pakistan, North Korea, Yemen) and non-state actors (terrorists, NGOs, international organizations, businesses, drug traffickers, etc.) will often be as important, if not more important, than the role of great power governments. We cannot rest on the self-centered assumption that if we choose the right policies, everything will play out properly. Afghanistan and Iraq continue to prove that the actions of the Afghan and Iraqi *governments*, and even more important, the Afghan and Iraqi *people*, may be greater determiners than the actions of the US government. While the great power, state-centric framework may have been more fitting for understanding the Cold War, it is more dangerous in today’s world in which our key adversaries are fragile states, non-state actors (terrorists, drug traffickers, etc.), and the “problems without passports” that they breed (terrorism, insurgency, international drug cartels, health pandemics, etc.). These problems do not fit within the old state-centric framework. Fortunately, since 9/11, most recognize the need to analyze these sorts of problems; unfortunately we do not necessarily know *how*. We have shifted our focus to these new, non-state problems but we are still viewing them through old state-centric lenses. We must adapt a new framework. But how?

Begin by questioning the basis of the nation-state form of government itself. Not necessarily because we seek to do away with it, but because this sheds light on why it works in some cases and fails in others. We often demand that countries around the world—from Africa to Afghanistan to Iraq—develop a strong nation-state government. But to do so effectively, we must understand the history of the emergence of the nation-state itself. Indeed, the assumption that the entire world must be divided into sovereign nation-states is a recent (and possibly transient) one.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 332

<sup>10</sup> Chabal & Daloz (1999), p. xviii

<sup>11</sup> Clapham (2002)

**3. Remember that the history of nation-state formation in the West was violent and centuries long and recognize that the current era of globalization is harder for nation-state formation than any other era.**

The context within which the nation-state emerged in the Core (West) is dramatically different from its more recent rise in the rest of the world. The history of state formation in the Core was a centuries-long process involving violence, warfare, oppression, state collapse, state absorption and changing borders. It was like a Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest process: strong states conquered weak states and/or weak states simply fell apart into smaller entities.<sup>12</sup> In today's world however, there are international organizations (e.g. the UN, the European Union, NGOs, etc.), international legal systems (human rights charters, the ICC, etc.), and stronger international values (democratic and human rights standards) that act against this Darwinian process. They are committed to upholding the sovereignty and borders of existing states preventing war.

Globalization also makes nation-state formation more difficult because it erodes governments' abilities to provide the basic functions of security, representation and welfare.<sup>13</sup> Many argue the globalized economy has consolidated itself in the Core countries of the West to the systematic exclusion of many in the Gap, forcing the Gap to either remain excluded from the global economy (which breeds poverty, terrorism and rogue tendencies) or reintegrate into the global economy through illegal, shadow markets.<sup>14</sup> These economies often develop into vast networks of authority that undermine state capacities and contribute to collapse.<sup>15</sup> Many of them are bigger and more powerful than the official economies and governments, and spread across national borders, contributing to regional instability.<sup>16</sup>

Exceedingly expensive economic and social costs also make the state difficult to maintain.<sup>17</sup> For example, the poorer and sparser a population, the more expensive state maintenance becomes until, from a simple cost-benefit analysis, the costs of maintaining a state outweigh the benefits.<sup>18</sup> "The fundamental problem facing state builders in Africa," historian Jeffrey Herbst summarizes, "has been to project authority over inhospitable territories that contain relatively low densities of people."<sup>19</sup>

The social costs—obedience, social discipline, loyalty, national identification, shared social values, etc.—are likewise demanding. Societies historically compensated for the lack/failure of statehood through mechanisms such as kinship, spiritual beliefs and social values that are "very difficult to reconcile with the demands of... states."<sup>20</sup> Some opine that the

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<sup>12</sup> Jackson (1990)

<sup>13</sup> Strange (1996); Clapham (2002); and Barnett (2004). For other studies of globalization's effects, see, *inter alia*, Jackson (1990), Kaldor (1996), Castells (1998), Keen (1998 & 2000), Reno (1998), Berdal & Malone (2000), Duffield (2001), etc.

<sup>14</sup> Berdal & Malone (2000), Duffield (2001), Barnett (2004), Collier (2007) and Picciotto et. al. (2007)

<sup>15</sup> Keen (1998 & 2000), Berdal & Malone (2000) and Duffield (2001)

<sup>16</sup> Examples include subversive blood diamond and conflict trade networks as well as insurgent forces like the Lord's Resistance Army. The DRC also provides excellent examples of these sorts of undermining and regionally interlinked economic networks. These networks are often bigger and more powerful than the official economies and governments.

<sup>17</sup> Clapham (2002), p. 778-9

<sup>18</sup> Clapham (2002)

<sup>19</sup> Herbst (2000), p. 11

<sup>20</sup> Clapham (2002), p. 778-9

universality of the state was never questioned, while the question of “whether the whole world could *afford* states” was never asked.<sup>21</sup>

#### **4. Recognize that the nation-state model may not fit many African societies, so we must allow for more “Africanized” variations of the state.**

The nation-state was not a natural outgrowth in Africa; instead, it was forcefully and awkwardly imposed by European colonizers. The borders defining today’s African countries are essentially the same borders that colonizers drew to divide and command their colonial territories. When colonizers divided these borders, they did so with more concern for the economic and resource output of land and less concern for tribal, ethnic and religious demographics. The borders thus arbitrarily cut across demographics, haphazardly dividing and grouping different groups amongst each other under new flags of national identity. People were basically told to subvert their traditional identity to a new national identity. This is a rather absurd request considering that these various traditional identities had defined people and societies for centuries, where as the new “national” identity (whether it be Congolese, Rwandan, Sudanese, etc.) was a relatively new concept. It should be no surprise then, that “national” governments often turned into seats of power for one group to exploit resources and wealth over others.<sup>22</sup> Yet classic theories rarely account for the impact of nonsensical borders, and the international community (and African governments) adamantly insists on upholding these borders. Few want to address the border issues because they fear the Pandora’s box it may open.

Political scientist Siba Grovogui remarks, “instead of treating the African condition as evidence” that the state may not be the best form of government for all societies, “theorists often construe deviations from the Western state model as a sign” that African states cannot “live up to the requirements” of government.<sup>23</sup> Instead, she suggests considering a different perspective: not that African societies cannot fit the nation-state model, but rather that the nation-state model may not fit African societies. One should not assume that because the modern state evolved to work so successfully in North America and Europe, it must be the natural evolutionary point of progress for all societies.

Given all these debilitating factors, is it not presumptuous to demand African states to replicate the success of European states within inalterable, arbitrary borders without violence in a mere number of years? Such demands forget the fact that violence and state collapse are *normal* phases of state formation.

#### **5. Avoid a strictly internal technical/administrative understanding of state collapse.**

Classic explanations of collapse narrowly focus on internal technical/administrative causes, such as African leaders’ inability to operate a state (i.e. bad governance, neopatrimonialism, etc.). Though accurate, this explanation is incomplete because it ignores many structural and international causes of collapse. Classic theories describe the failure of the African state in terms of the inability of Africans to succeed with the states they were given. This

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 778

<sup>22</sup> This is *not* to say that conflict is due to ethnic hatred. Conflicts have many different causes, and many seemingly “ethnic” conflicts are in reality due to economic or other causes under the guise of “ethnic conflict.”

<sup>23</sup> Grovogui (2002), p. 316

flawed logic assumes that: 1) the international system of sovereignty is neutral and 2) that states work if properly operated; thus collapse is a consequence of the inability to operate the state within a supposedly impartial international system. But this logic rarely considers the irrational and ahistorical form of the given state (or the international system). It sticks dogmatically to a one-size-fits-all blueprint. But this blueprint is not working: “The puzzle is not how and why [these states] may fail, but how and why they exist or persist at all.”<sup>24</sup>

The international system of sovereignty (the political “rules of the game”) and the globalized economy (the economic “rules of the game”) are not a neutral setting. Rather, they are active factors that can contribute to collapse. In this way, collapse can derive as much from outside a country as inside. The point here is not to argue against the state per se, nor to locate blame. Rather, it is to broaden our understanding of state collapse.

## **6. Collapse and war may represent transformation into a new order rather than violent breakdown into anarchy.**

How many times have you heard failed states in Africa described as vacuums of chaos and anarchy wherein senseless violence begets more senseless violence in an unending cycle? Scholars and reporters repeat this description so often that we assume that when governments collapse, societies automatically collapse as well, falling into vacuums of barbaric anarchy.

Now what if I told you that this is not necessarily true? New research increasingly reveals an overlooked and misunderstood trend: systems of informal, adaptive orders emerging in collapsed/failed states. These systems provide governmental services (i.e. economic, social, and/or political services) in the wake of state collapse. What we are witnessing, one scholar explains, is not the collapse of the state so much as the formation of alternative economic and political systems to replace the state.<sup>25</sup> This trend directly undermines the assumption that state collapse automatically begets violent anarchy.

One might refer to these systems as “governance in the mist,” because like the gorillas in the famous film, they may appear as a distant visage, difficult to see and even more difficult to trace. But this is only because we are not looking properly. We must counter this lapse, but how?

## **7. Absorb more anthropology, sociology and economics and think of war and peace as two sides of the same coin, not mutually opposed.**

Start by stepping back and looking at how the world operates in a broader sense. Do not focus so narrowly on the state. This broader perspective should incorporate the numerous, overlapping and interconnected networks that make the world operate. These networks still include government relations, but to a much larger degree than any time in history, they also include business networks (legal and criminal), markets (legal and illegal), social networks, religious networks, tribal networks, so on and so forth. To grasp these changes, we should integrate more anthropology, sociology, business/economics (especially of illegal markets) and

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<sup>24</sup> Milliken & Krause (2002), p. 763

<sup>25</sup> Duffield, Mark (2001), *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (London: Zed Books)

other disciplines. While the purpose of political science, international relations and security studies is to study *government* relations, these other disciplines focus on understanding *societies*. You cannot build better *governments* without better understanding *societies*. Thus a multi-disciplined approach would help fill in the gaps for a more complete picture. The military's adoption of "network-centric warfare" and "human terrain systems" are examples of similar approaches applied to war fighting. Analysts must apply "network-centric" approaches to state collapse and state building.

We must also rethink our definitions of war and peace. We tend to make a strict distinction between them, but this dichotomy is too black-and-white. Anthropologist Begoña Aretxaga writes, "Peace and war are not so much two opposed states of being as they are multi-faceted, ambiguous, mutually imbricated areas of struggle."<sup>26</sup> We should blur the dichotomy between war and peace.<sup>27</sup> War, like peace, is a social project. One must deny it "special status" and analyze it as one such project among many competing others, made and moderated by social agents through social processes. Separating it from this context "risks disabling precisely the strategies and tools of social organization, culture and politics through which violence can be reduced."<sup>28</sup>

Conflict/development expert Mark Duffield argues that state collapse and the "new wars" associated with it represent modes of organic social transformation.<sup>29</sup> What we are witnessing is not the collapse of the state so much as the formation of alternative economic and political systems to replace the state. Many groups are deciding to opt out of the modern, liberal nation-state model that has failed them. Rather than irrationality and breakdown, Duffield sees "the emergence of new forms of rights to wealth, political legitimacy and modes of accumulation and redistribution": in other words, new forms of governance that blur the line between society and state.<sup>30</sup> What analysts mistake for "complex political emergencies" are actually "emerging political complexes."<sup>31</sup> The point is not to champion these complexes per se (they are often predatory and illiberal), but to highlight the transformative processes underlying collapse.

We should thus reassess the strict state-society dichotomy. Political scientist Timothy Raeymaekers suggests adopting anthropologist Joel Migdal's "state-in-society model." This model foregoes the state-society dichotomy, focusing instead on a "two-way state-society struggle" occurring not "between state and society as such, but rather between different social forces" competing for social/political/economic control.<sup>32</sup> This broadens the focus beyond mere institutional/administrative failure, absorbs the social transformation and "emerging political complexes" considerations, recognizes state collapse as part of (rather than separate from) state formation, and liberates analysis from the state-centered, great power bias.

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<sup>26</sup> Aretxaga (1997), p. 4

<sup>27</sup> Richards (2005)

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 3

<sup>29</sup> Duffield (2001)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 140

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 14

<sup>32</sup> Raeymaekers (2005); Migdal (2001)



## Conclusion

This research suggests two important considerations. Firstly, participation in the state order is not a given. Vast swaths of populations choose to opt out of inadequate state systems for alternative, non-state systems. Reasons for opting out may vary from violent, greedy opportunism to lack of other options. Nonetheless, (non)participation in the state is a *rational* calculation, and should not necessarily be seen as irrational, immoral or even bad. For many, the risks of participating in the governmental system outweigh the benefits. Analysts of Africa suffer from an “engagement paradigm” that fails to recognize this.<sup>33</sup>

Secondly, collapse is as much a beginning as it is an end. It should be viewed for its potential to create a new, better system in the wake of the old. Unfortunately, state building efforts falter by reconstructing systems that maintain many of the same elements that contributed to breakdown in the first place. Fortunately, by shedding the old framework, we can avoid going in circles and instead forge a new path towards better states.

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<sup>33</sup> Azarya & Chazan (1987)

