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Charles J. Sullivan

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IS NATION-BUILDING A MYTH?

State-Building: America's Foreign Policy Challenge

Charles J. Sullivan

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ABSTRACT: This article provides an overview of the domestic security environments in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria today and discusses the danger new radical-inspired states pose to the United States and the international community. Ultimately, state-building remains the primary strategic means to address this new challenge. However, the world should prepare for the rise of radical-inspired states if state-building proves to be impossible.

Washington is not ready to dispense with the Global War on Terror. The scourge of radical Islam still constitutes a serious threat to the stability of the international system. Recently, the world has witnessed a series of terrorist attacks take place in the West, while the governments of countries such as Nigeria, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and others, struggle to quell insurgent forces and terrorist groups. Four countries in particular merit America's close attention over the span of the next several years: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. All represent a new type of menace. They resemble "failed" or "collapsed" states in form.¹ Yet they are inherently precarious because new radical-inspired states (or "terror" states) are developing within their borders.² This past decade, the conventional academic wisdom argued certain failed states undermined global stability because terrorists could operate with impunity from inside such countries.³ Nowadays this threat is undergoing a stunning metamorphosis, with insurgent-based movements transforming into new states and challenging the host governments of these four countries for supremacy.

Today, the Afghan, Iraqi, Libyan, and Syrian governments are all fighting for their very survival, and America has the ability to play a role in determining whether they ultimately endure or perish. Surely, some

1 For definitions of "failed" and "collapsed" states, see Robert I. Rotberg, "The Failure and Collapse of Nation-States: Breakdown, Prevention, and Repair," in Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1-10.

2 In formulating this phrase, I drew upon the following works: Tim Arango, "ISIS Transforming into Functioning State that Uses Terror as Tool," *New York Times*, July 21, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/22/world/middleeast/isis-transforming-into-functioning-state-that-uses-terror-as-tool.html?_r=0; Audrey K. Cronin, "ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 2 (March/April 2015): 87-98.

3 Robert I. Rotberg, "Failed States in a World of Terror," *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 4 (July/August 2002): 127-140. For a discussion on this topic, see also Michael J. Mazarr, "The Rise and Fall of the Failed State Paradigm," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 1 (January/February 2014): 113-121.

Dr. Charles J. Sullivan is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Republic of Kazakhstan. Dr. Sullivan specializes in Central Asian and Russian politics, political violence, state failure, terrorism, and American foreign policy. Dr. Sullivan earned his PhD in political science from The George Washington University.

policymakers and scholars believe the protracted conflicts raging within these countries are not (or no longer) America's primary concern, that such wars can only be resolved by local political actors, and that the United States should not be bestowing foreign aid upon politically inept governments led by corrupt utilitarian-minded elites or rushing to the defense of human rights and international law every time some beleaguered autocrat clinging to power violates the rules of war. While such views hold merit, the domestic security environments in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria are seemingly becoming more hazardous by the day. Hence, the United States risks a great deal in terms of its national security interests if it decides to turn away from these countries.

In Iraq and Syria, terrorists fighting under the banner of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) have murdered US citizens, massacred and enslaved ethnic and religious minorities, and looted and pillaged centers containing historical and cultural artifacts.⁴ In Libya, the country has descended into anarchy since the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi. Rival militias fight for control over stretches of territory, while ISIL-affiliated and other terrorist groups infiltrate the country due to the lack of a central government. In Afghanistan, a recent deadly wave of terrorist attacks has called into question whether the Afghan government could survive should the remaining US military forces depart.⁵ Overall, if America decided to disengage from these countries, radical Islamists could capture greater swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria, Libya may devolve into a terrorist haven, and Afghan cities may soon start falling to the Taliban. Can anything be done to prevent these scenarios from happening?

This article describes the deteriorating domestic security environments in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. It then discusses the options available to the United States in terms of addressing these concerns. Thereafter, it analyzes the nature of the new threat facing the United States in the Global War on Terror.

Washington has decided to confront the rise of this new menace, primarily by striving to "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIL in western Iraq and northern and eastern Syria.⁶ In addition, the US government will likely try to block the expansion of ISIL's self-proclaimed caliphate to include portions of Libya as well as prevent the conversion of the Taliban into a new state in Afghanistan. State-building though remains the primary strategic means to address this challenge. Unfortunately, however, America's track record in terms of prosecuting such ventures has not been very impressive, and whether an ISIL and/or Taliban-led

4 For an overview of this terrorist organization, see W. Andrew Terrill, "Understanding the Strengths and Vulnerabilities of ISIS," *Parameters* 44, no. 3 (Autumn 2014): 13-23. The US Government has publicly stated ISIL has committed genocide against a variety of minority groups across the Middle East. See Carol Morello and William Branigan, "Kerry Declares Islamic State Has Committed Genocide," *Washington Post*, March 17, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kerry-declares-islamic-state-has-committed-genocide/2016/03/17/35eaa5e6-ec3e-11e5-a6f3-21ccdb5f74e_story.html.

5 US President Barack Obama has stated that several thousand US military forces will remain in Afghanistan post-2016. See Matthew Rosenberg and Michael D. Shear, "In Reversal, Obama Says US Soldiers Will Stay in Afghanistan to 2017," *New York Times*, October 15, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/16/world/asia/obama-troop-withdrawal-afghanistan.html?_r=0.

6 Tanya Somanader, "President Obama Provides an Update on Our Strategy to Degrade and Destroy ISIL," The White House, July 6, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/07/06/president-obama-provides-update-our-strategy-degrade-and-destroy-isil>.

state can be beaten back largely depends upon Washington's desire to remain engaged in a series of protracted conflicts.

America and Enduring Wars

Why are acts of political violence so pervasive in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria today? The hard truth is the contemporary problems which torment these four countries are at least partially due to America's actions (or inactions). In Afghanistan, the origins of this country's troubles date back to the days of the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989) when the United States and other foreign states supported the *mujabedeen* against the invading USSR and its Afghan communist-led puppet government. After the departure of Soviet troops America turned away from Afghanistan, leaving the *mujabedeen* factions to fight one another, which set the stage for the Afghan state's implosion.⁷ Since the onset of the war in Afghanistan in 2001, the United States and its coalition partners have sought to rebuild a broken country. But the Afghan state remains largely propped up by the US government, and the Taliban do not appear to be interested in engaging in formal negotiations.⁸

In Iraq, the mistakes of the US-led military occupation are well-known now. A series of fateful policy decisions gravely undermined domestic order and spawned the rise of an insurgency.⁹ In time, and with much effort and sacrifice, the US military largely suppressed the Iraqi insurgency by adhering to an innovative strategy grounded in counter-insurgency principles.¹⁰ But a premature withdrawal in 2011, followed by the application of exclusivist governing practices by local politicians during Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's tenure, reawakened sectarian hostilities across the country and aggressively undermined the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of many Iraqi citizens.¹¹ In 2014, Baghdad surrendered a significant portion of its territory along with several major cities to ISIL. To further complicate matters, reports now indicate Shiite militias and fighters affiliated with the *Hezbollah* terrorist organization are battling against ISIL in Iraq.¹² It is unclear whether the Iraqi military will be able to mount a successful counteroffensive to retake cities such as Mosul from ISIL and hold them.

7 Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A Short History of Its People and Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 238-260. For a discussion on US involvement in the Soviet-Afghan War, see Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, From the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 50-186.

8 For a discussion on this issue, see Charles J. Sullivan, "The Coming Fall of Kabul," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo 386, George Washington University (September 2015), http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Pepm386_Sullivan_Sept2015.pdf.

9 For a discussion on this issue, see Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, reprint ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2007). See also Larry Diamond, "What Went Wrong in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 5 (September/October 2004): 34-56.

10 See Andrew F. Krepinevich, "How to Win in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (September/October 2005): 87-104; and Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq*, reprint ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2010).

11 Joel Rayburn, "The Coming Disintegration of Iraq," *Washington Post*, August 15, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-coming-disintegration-of-iraq/2014/08/15/2b3efd80-2300-11e4-958c-268a320a60ce_story.html. See also Ned Parker, "The Iraq We Left Behind," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 2 (March/April 2012): 94-110; Kenneth M. Pollack and Barbara F. Walter, "Escaping the Civil War Trap in the Middle East," *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 36.

12 Liz Sly and Suzan Haidamous, "Lebanon's Hezbollah Acknowledges Battling the Islamic State in Iraq," *Washington Post*, February 16, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/lebanons-hezbollah-acknowledges-battling-the-islamic-state-in-iraq/2015/02/16/4448b21a-b619-11e4-bc30-a4c75503948a_story.html.

In Libya, NATO went to war against the Gaddafi regime in 2011 in response to the late autocrat's determination to institute a bloody crackdown so as to stave off rebellion. But the NATO-led military intervention accomplished very little (other than the overthrow and slaying of Gaddafi, which in turn led to the opening of a security vacuum in his regime's wake).¹³ Today, the situation on the ground clearly reveals the inherent shortsightedness of the international community in not deploying a multinational peacekeeping force to Libya in the early days of the post-Gaddafi era. On account of domestic political considerations in Western capitals, however, the decision was made to only conduct an air war in the hopes of avoiding becoming too heavily involved. The absence of a united central government in Libya sparked a major political crisis involving rival governing coalitions laying claim to power, as well as opened the door to the possibility that Libya could become a "satellite" of ISIL.¹⁴

Finally, the situation in Syria is catastrophic. Political order disintegrated into a full-scale civil war when President Bashar al-Assad instituted his own crackdown in 2011 in response to mass protests calling for his ouster. Although the United States has publicly called for Assad's departure and threatened military action in response to the Syrian government's purported usage of chemical weapons, no military campaign has been initiated against the Assad regime.¹⁵ Instead, with the exception of the battle for the city of Kobane (which Kurdish forces, with the assistance of US airpower, successfully defended from an ISIL advance this past year), Washington has been reluctant to enter the fray. Recently, there has been some talk about the United States and Turkey creating a "buffer zone" in Syria along the Turkish border, but it is unclear as to how it would be managed.¹⁶ As of now, in addition to enhancing its airpower capabilities at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey, the White House has decided to deploy a small contingent of US Special Operations Forces to Syria to provide "advice and assistance" to "local forces" battling against ISIL.¹⁷

The United States seeks to bring about endings to all of these prolonged conflicts that are suitable to US interests and definitive in

13 Tony Karon, "'Mission Accomplished' in Libya? Not So Fast," *Time*, January 30, 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/01/30/mission-accomplished-in-libya-not-so-fast/>. For an analysis of the oversights and policy blunders associated with the NATO-led military intervention in Libya, see Alan J. Kuperman, "A Model Humanitarian Intervention? Reassessing NATO's Libya Campaign," *International Security* 38, no. 1 (Summer 2013): 105-136.

14 The Editorial Board, "What Libya's Unraveling Means," *New York Times*, February 14, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/opinion/sunday/what-libyas-unraveling-means.html?_r=0.

15 For an overview of the allegations of the Syrian government's usage of chemical weapons in the Syrian civil war, see Hugh Naylor, "Report: Syria Using Chemical Weapons in Growing Number of Attacks," *Washington Post*, June 3, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/report-syria-using-chemical-weapons-in-growing-number-of-attacks/2015/06/03/0ed16e26-0a0e-11e5-951e-8e15090d64ae_story.html. For an overview of the US government's overt program to train Syrian rebels to fight against ISIL, see Eric Schmitt and Ben Hubbard, "US Revamping Rebel Force Fighting ISIS in Syria," *New York Times*, September 6, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/07/world/middleeast/us-to-revamp-training-program-to-fight-isis.html?_r=0.

16 Erin Cunningham, "US, Turkey Aim to Create Buffer Zone on Syrian Border. Nobody Knows How," *Washington Post*, August 13, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/us-said-it-will-create-a-safe-zone-on-syrian-border-but-nobody-knows-how/2015/08/12/4c7d0baa-37e4-11e5-ab7b-6416d97c73c2_story.html.

17 Peter Baker, Helene Cooper, and David E. Sanger, "Obama Sends Special Operations Forces to Help Fight ISIS in Syria," *New York Times*, October 30, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/31/world/obama-will-send-forces-to-syria-to-help-fight-the-islamic-state.html>.

nature. In Afghanistan, Washington is working to ensure the survival of the Afghan government and prevent the return of the Taliban to power. In Iraq, America is assisting the Iraqi government in an effort to evict ISIL from its strongholds and reassert Baghdad's authority over newly reconquered territories. In Libya, the United States is committed to helping broker a political solution to resolve the current governing crisis through the United Nations. In Syria, Washington aspires to neutralize ISIL and pressure Assad to leave power. The main problem, however, is none of these objectives are readily realizable on account of how the designated host governments exercise authority within these four countries.

A Failed-State Syndrome

All four countries are embroiled in civil wars that show no signs of winding down. The Taliban are poised to mount a challenge to the Afghan government. The Iraqi government recently reasserted its control over the city of Ramadi, but it remains unknown as to when (or if) Mosul will be liberated from ISIL's rule. Libya's political deadlock cannot be resolved solely through dialogue and compromise. And Assad is not about to relinquish his authority in Syria. Instead, the Russian Federation has decided to deploy "military assistance" to Damascus, presumably in the hopes of ensuring the Assad regime's survival.¹⁸ Moscow's military intervention in Syria is problematic for the United States because the presence of Russian forces lessens the possibility Assad can be dislodged from power. The Kremlin's strategy thus appears to consist of bombing US-backed anti-Assad forces to shore up the Syrian government, while using Syria as a "testing ground" to display Russia's military capabilities.¹⁹

While the security situations in these countries are all unique, the respective political systems are afflicted by the same syndrome: state failure. The host governments in question all suffer from crises of legitimacy on account of their inability to assert political authority and to provide social services to their own citizens.²⁰ As such, basic issues of legitimacy and authority will continue to vex these troubled political systems, and if such matters are left unresolved, acts of political violence will unfortunately remain an endemic feature of these societies. A variety of academic studies claim ineffective governance and

18 Nathan Hodge, "Russia to Continue Military Support to Assad Government, Says Vladimir Putin," *Wall Street Journal*, September 16, 2015.

19 Adam Entous, "US Sees Russian Drive Against CIA-Backed Rebels in Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 2015; Steven Lee Myers and Eric Schmitt, "Russian Military Uses Syria as Proving Ground, and West Takes Notice," *New York Times*, October 14, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/15/world/middleeast/russian-military-uses-syria-as-proving-ground-and-west-takes-notice.html>. Yet, President Vladimir Putin has recently ordered Russian military forces to withdraw from Syria, presumably because a negotiated political settlement of some sort between Damascus and certain rebel groups is within Russia's best interest. For a more nuanced discussion, see Max Fisher, "Putin Withdrawing Russian Forces from Syria: Why Now and Why It Matters," *Vox*, March 14, 2016, <http://www.vox.com/2016/3/14/11224544/putin-syria-russia-withdraw>.

20 For a discussion on the concept of state failure and its defining characteristics, see Jack Goldstone, "Pathways to State Failure," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 25 (2008): 285-296.

exclusionary rule are the key drivers of state failure and internecine conflict.²¹ Unfortunately, the ruling elites of failing states, for the most part, do not seem to want to take such findings to heart.

Washington has stressed to Kabul and Baghdad that local governing officials need to demonstrate a credible commitment to democracy by respecting the institutional foundations of their political systems. They have failed to do so.²² In Libya and Syria, political order has deteriorated to such an extent the only way to stabilize these countries likely entails the insertion of a disciplined and resource-laden military force for an indefinite period. In brief, there are few options from which the United States can select to address the security challenges posed by these countries. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States has fought two long and expensive wars. In Libya and Syria, America is noticeably more gun-shy. And in all of these countries even the most powerful local political actors cannot enforce their rule and cultivate much legitimacy.²³

The New Challenge in the Global War on Terror

In the early post-9/11 era, Islamic terrorism represented the paramount security concern facing the United States. In confronting this threat, the US government began adhering to a new and ambitious foreign policy doctrine, consisting of capturing and killing terrorists, working with other state actors to undermine the capabilities of such groups to carry out attacks, and forcefully uprooting rogue states and replacing them with new democratic-oriented political systems. Now, after the expenditure of much blood and treasure, the United States seeks to avoid becoming entangled in any more protracted conflicts in the Middle East. But a strict adherence to this aim could prove to be rather costly if insurgent-based movements convert themselves into new states.

Insurgencies differ from states in terms of their respective organizational structure and functionality. According to some scholars, insurgencies are “characterized by small, lightly armed bands practicing guerilla warfare from rural base areas.”²⁴ States, by contrast, are “coercion-wielding organizations” capable of waging war against other states and providing social services to people on account of their ability to project authority through the amassing of resources.²⁵ Bearing this in mind, ISIL is in the midst of converting itself from an insurgent force

21 As an example, see James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” *The American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (February 2003): 75-90; Barbara F. Walter, “Why Bad Governance Leads to Repeat Civil War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2014): 1-31; Lars-Erik Cederman, Andreas Wimmer, and Brian Min, “Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel? New Data and Analysis,” *World Politics* 62, no. 1 (January 2010): 87-119. See also Kenneth M. Pollack and Barbara F. Walter, “Escaping the Civil War Trap in the Middle East,” *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 41.

22 Freedom House evaluates Afghanistan and Iraq as “not free” and awards both a “freedom rating” of “6” out of “7.” See “Freedom in the World 2015,” Freedom House (2015), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2015#.VeqnJhGqqkp>.

23 For a discussion on the indicators of state failure in all of these countries, see “Fragile States Index 2015,” Fund for Peace (2015), <http://fsi.fundforpeace.org/>. According to the index rankings, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria are currently listed as being on “High Alert” whereas Libya is on “Alert.”

24 Fearon and Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” 75.

25 Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, A.D. 990-1992* (Malden: Blackwell, 1992), 1, 96. See also Charles Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschmeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 169-191.

into a new state. In terms of its functions, ISIL behaves very much like a state by combating other states, eradicating threats to its own authority within its self-proclaimed caliphate, providing social services to those who live under ISIL's rule, as well as extracting resources in return.²⁶ ISIL has also captured military equipment and vehicles, welcomed foreigners into its ranks, and created an internal security force to impose its rule (which permits the organization to maintain its writ over an expanse of territory). ISIL though more closely resembles a type of "phantom state" that engages in "hybrid warfare."²⁷ Governing entities like ISIL can develop inside politically unstable countries. And it is through the various "pathways" by which states come to fail that such aspiring actors are able to arise.²⁸

Can aspiring state actors like ISIL be defeated? So far, the United States has opted to confront ISIL in Iraq and Syria, albeit to a lesser degree in the latter. That said, there are several major concerns with the current US strategy. To begin, Washington has no desire to reengage fully in Iraq by deploying large numbers of American soldiers. Instead, the US government is betting on the notion the Iraqi army will be able to replicate the success of the aforementioned US counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq. Yet judging by the state of the Iraqi army's professionalism (or lack thereof), vulnerability to sectarianism, and likely inability to broker deals with the Sunni tribes in the northern and western regions of the country, it will be very difficult to repeat history. American forces are thus arguably needed to help evict ISIL, hold territory, foster lasting political arrangements with the Sunni tribes, and monitor Baghdad's governing practices.²⁹ To date, Iraqi forces have experienced some success on the battlefield (such as with the retaking of the Baiji oil refinery in 2015), but it appears US air support and assistance from Shiite militias were necessary.³⁰ It is also noteworthy to not overlook the fact that ISIL is headquartered within the city of Raqqa in neighboring Syria. So, even if ISIL's forces were to be expelled from all the major cities and surrounding areas currently under its control in Iraq, the group could

26 See Arango, "ISIS Transforming into Functioning State that Uses Terror as Tool." See also Ben Hubbard, "Offering Services, ISIS Digs In Deeper in Seized Territories," *New York Times*, June 16, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/17/world/middleeast/offering-services-isis-ensconces-itself-in-seized-territories.html?_r=0. For a discussion on state-building measures in a general sense as discussed here, see Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," 181; Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, 96. For a discussion on ISIL's sources of income, see Cronin, "ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group."

27 For an overview of the concept of a "phantom state," see Daniel L. Byman and Charles King, "The Phantom Menace," *New York Times*, August 15, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/16/opinion/the-phantom-menace.html>; Daniel Byman and Charles King, "The Mystery of Phantom States," *The Washington Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 43-57. Cronin (2015) uses the term "pseudo-state" to describe ISIL. See Cronin, "ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group," for a discussion on the concept of "hybrid warfare." See Frank G. Hoffman, "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges," *Joint Force Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2009): 34-39.

28 For a discussion on the various "pathways" that failed states follow, see Goldstone, "Pathways to State Failure," 288.

29 Max Boot, "Should the US Send Ground Troops To Fight ISIS? Yes. Uproot the Enemy," *Time* 185, no. 8 (2015): 32. On the current state of the Iraqi Army, see Barry Posen, "The Iraqi Army No Longer Exists," *Defense One*, June 7, 2015, <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2015/06/iraqi-army-no-longer-exists/114607/>.

30 Michael R. Gordon, "Iraqi Forces and Shiite Militias Retake Oil Refinery from ISIS," *New York Times*, October 16, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/17/world/middleeast/iraqi-forces-and-shiite-militias-retake-oil-refinery-from-isis.html>.

still remain a functioning entity within Syria and retain the capability to wage an insurgency in Iraq.³¹

At present, the US government and the international community lack the political will to confront ISIL directly on Syrian soil because of the sheer complexity involved in terms of trying to pacify the country.³² By targeting ISIL, the United States seems to believe it is possible to deny the organization the ability to function as a state. According to such thinking, without a sound economic base and politically astute leadership, ISIL will not be able to project its authority. But it remains unknown as to what governing entity could ultimately supersede ISIL. It is utopian to think the Free Syrian Army could establish authority over the northern and eastern regions of the country, since it lacks the capability to vanquish ISIL on the battlefield.³³ In light of these circumstances, reconstructing the Syrian state to its pre-civil war composition (and without the Assad regime in control of any territory) may be an impossibility. As such, the world may only be able to hope for the formation of a grouping of new states now.

In Afghanistan and Libya, by working to prevent the return of the Taliban and the establishment of a new ISIL outpost the United States seems to be pursuing a similar strategy grounded in denying the Taliban and ISIL affiliates the opportunity to acquire the capacity to function as new states.³⁴ US foreign policy in North Africa and Southwest Asia is therefore coming to be based around inhibiting these actors from acquiring access to the financial, human, and military resources necessary for them to challenge the host governments in place.³⁵ To stem the acquisition of such resources, the United States is likely taking precautions towards protecting urban centers and weapons caches from falling into enemy hands and foiling foreign recruits from joining up. Still, despite America's efforts the possibility exists that the world may soon have to contend with a resolute ISIL-led state in Iraq and Syria that wields power over portions of Libya and a rejuvenated Taliban-led state in control of stretches of Afghan territory.

So, Is State-Building the Solution?

Nowadays, America is confronted with the shortcomings of its military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the unforeseen consequences of NATO's brief campaign in Libya and Washington's decision to refrain from doing more in Syria to prevent domestic order from disintegrating in the early stages of the outbreak of violence. To

31 For a similar point, see Kenneth M. Pollack and Barbara F. Walter, "Escaping the Civil War Trap in the Middle East," 39.

32 For a discussion on the various difficulties hindering any effort to bring the Syrian civil war to a definitive ending, see Kenneth M. Pollack and Barbara F. Walter, "Escaping the Civil War Trap in the Middle East," 38.

33 Erin Banco, "Four Years Later, The Free Syrian Army Has Collapsed," *International Business Times*, March 14, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/four-years-later-free-syrian-army-has-collapsed-1847116>.

34 For a discussion on how ISIL is attempting to function as a state in Libya today, see David D. Kirkpatrick, Ben Hubbard, and Eric Schmitt, "ISIS' Grip on Libyan City Gives It a Fallback Option," *New York Times*, November 28, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/world/middleeast/isis-grip-on-libyan-city-gives-it-a-fallback-option.html?_r=0.

35 On the types of resources insurgents need to sustain their campaigns (and would most likely need to convert themselves into states), see Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," 80.

make matters worse, the world is also bearing witness to a vulgar type of state-building taking place in Iraq and Syria. In the event ISIL evolves into a consolidated state, America would have virtually no other option but to try to “contain” its further expansion.³⁶ As of recently, ISIL is allegedly straining to provide social services to people residing within its self-proclaimed caliphate on account of sustained airstrikes from coalition forces and fighting on the ground.³⁷ But the group’s defeat is far from imminent, and the latest spate of deadly terrorist attacks in Turkey, Egypt, Lebanon, France, Belgium, and elsewhere indicates that ISIL and its affiliate organizations possess an international reach.³⁸ Consequently, the international community should expect acts of terrorism to occur on a frequent basis as long as ISIL and its affiliates persist.

Accordingly, adhering to a militaristic foreign policy agenda is arguably the only way for America to combat the rise of new radical-inspired states. But even if the United States subscribes to a new guiding doctrine grounded in trying to block the consolidation of such entities, building up new states or revising those already in place will prove to be extremely difficult. In the early post-9/11 era, the United States fashioned state-building into serving as the cornerstone of its foreign policy in troubled regions of the world. In spite of all its drawbacks, state-building seemingly still holds the key to addressing such concerns today, be it in the form of reconstituting failed states or raising new ones.

By this logic, to stifle the rise of new radical-inspired states America and its partners would have to work to build durable and capable governing entities in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. History, though, indicates fashioning new states is not so simple and straightforward. Based upon the United States’ experiences in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars alongside the findings of a variety of academic studies, military intervening in such conflicts is not a panacea for resolving them or replacing authoritarian governments with durable democratic regimes.³⁹ Furthermore, rebuilding failed states is tremendously time-consuming, and the success of any foreign assistance program largely depends upon whether local political actors are willing to play by a new set of rules promulgated from afar and govern effectively.⁴⁰ Still, the United States cannot categorically admit its democracy-promoting ventures in

36 Stephen M. Walt, “What Should We Do If the Islamic State Wins?” *Foreign Policy*, June 10, 2015. See also Cronin, “ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group;” Posen, “The Iraqi Army No Longer Exists.”

37 Ben Hubbard, “ISIS Promise of Statehood Falling Far Short, Ex-Residents Say,” *New York Times*, December 1, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/02/world/middleeast/isis-promise-of-statehood-falling-far-short-ex-residents-say.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=first-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=1.

38 Karen Yourish, Derek Watkins, and Tom Giratikanon, “Where ISIS Has Directed and Inspired Attacks Around the World,” *New York Times*, March 22, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/17/world/middleeast/map-isis-attacks-around-the-world.html?_r=0.

39 See Edward N. Luttwak, “Give War A Chance,” *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 4 (July/August 1999): 36-44; David E. Cunningham, “Blocking Resolution: How External States Can Prolong Civil Wars,” *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 2 (2010): 115-127; Eva Bellin, “The Iraqi Intervention and Democracy in Comparative Historical Perspective,” *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 4 (Winter 2004-2005): 595-608; and Alexander B. Downes and Jonathan Monten, “Forced to Be Free? Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Rarely Leads to Democratization,” *International Security* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2013): 90-131.

40 Mazarr, “The Rise and Fall of the Failed State Paradigm.” For a discussion on the various difficulties facing the United States in relying on local actors to help wage counterinsurgency efforts, see Daniel L. Byman, “Friends Like These: Counterinsurgency and the War on Terrorism,” *International Security* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 79-115.

Afghanistan and Iraq have failed; nor can it turn a blind eye towards Libya and Syria. As such, Washington could plausibly reestablish state-building as the centerpiece of its foreign policy to address the security threats posed by all of these countries.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States' superimposition of democratic institutions on top of existing social structures characterized by ethnic, tribal, and sectarian rivalries has arguably discredited democracy as a popularly acceptable form of governance in both of these countries. Internecine animosities aside, the other major reason why state consolidation has not taken place is because security was never firmly established in Afghanistan or Iraq. Reason thus dictates acts of political violence (ranging from assassinations and terrorist attacks to armed clashes among rival forces and retribution killings) will continue to define Afghan and Iraqi politics as long as the domestic security environments remain fragile.⁴¹ As bad as the situations are in Afghanistan and Iraq, things are debatably worse in Libya and Syria. At present, ISIL appears to be shifting its resources to Libya so the group can operate from an "alternative base" in the city of Surt.⁴² Meanwhile, the international community is observing a *de facto* partition of Syria taking place along ethno-sectarian and tribal lines, and the results do not look promising.⁴³ So, can the United States engage in state-building?

America has invested heavily (and therefore has much to lose) in Afghanistan and Iraq. In general, if the domestic security environments there take a turn for the worse, then America's regional interests in Central Asia and the Persian Gulf will be at stake. Bearing this in mind, the United States is currently focusing its efforts on reestablishing Baghdad and Kabul's authoritative writ and preventing the loss of control over any other major urban centers.⁴⁴ Yet any state-building effort would also necessitate overseeing a revived US-led democratic-oriented reconstruction effort. Jettisoning the feeble democratic institutions in place will not serve to alleviate Afghanistan or Iraq's political troubles, for the main problems lay not with the institutional arrangements of these systems but with the degree to which said institutions are respected by local political actors. Taking this into consideration, the United States would need to employ its resources to convince the Afghan and Iraqi ruling elites to change their ways. Change would entail local political actors empowering democratic institutions through: abiding by and accepting the outcomes of free and fair electoral processes, permitting political parties to compete fairly for representation within the governments, upholding the rule of law, providing social services to citizens, and establishing secure environments for the economies to flourish.

In addition, Washington would have to refrain from falling again into the trap of providing military assistance to the benefit of

41 For a discussion on how retribution killings are becoming a major concern in Iraq, see Michael Weiss and Michael Pregent, "The US is Providing Air Cover for Ethnic Cleansing in Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, March 28, 2015.

42 Kirkpatrick, Hubbard, and Schmitt, "ISIS' Grip on Libyan City Gives It a Fallback Option."

43 Samia Nakhoul, "Syria is Breaking Up into Fiefdoms," *Business Insider*, June 29, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/r-syrian-insurgents-carve-out-fiefdoms-in-de-facto-partition-2015-6>.

44 The Afghan government temporarily lost control over the city of Kunduz during the fall of 2015 to the Taliban but thereafter reasserted its authority with the help of US military assistance. See Rod Nordland, "Taliban End Takeover of Kunduz After 15 Days," *New York Times*, October 13, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/14/world/asia/taliban-afghanistan-kunduz.html?_r=0.

inclusive-minded leaders. In trying to prevent this outcome, the United States would need to insist on Afghan and Iraqi forces taking the lead in these fights, since their host governments must learn the means by which authority comes to be perceived as legitimate. Taken together, these facets could embody the spirit of a renewed US-led democratic-oriented state-building endeavor in Afghanistan and Iraq. Of course, this would require Washington believing (a) it is within America's interests to continue devoting a considerable amount of time and energy to reconstructing Afghanistan and Iraq, and (b) local political actors have seen the error of their ways and are now up to the task. It is also unclear as to whether the United States can succeed outright since neighboring states such as Pakistan and Iran will continue to advance their own respective interests in Afghanistan and Iraq. America thus needs to engage in some deep soul-searching, for in renewing its efforts in these two countries the United States would find itself striving to counter various forces pressing for the fragmentation of the Afghan and Iraqi states.

In Libya and Syria, the situations on the ground are even more difficult to rectify and US interests are not nearly as apparent. Democracy promotion efforts within these countries would serve no purpose at the moment, since no governing entities exist which the United States can count on to further any state-building endeavor. As such, pending the United States believes that it is worth devoting a tremendous amount of time and energy to these countries, Washington literally would have to start from scratch in terms of amassing the coercive powers of new governing entities and assisting in military campaigns to neutralize other local political actors which do not share the same visions for the future. Such a strategy is also quite imperialist in nature and (assuming that the United States was to intervene more directly) could lead to a repeat of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Finally, by sanctioning a hasty military intervention in Libya, stepping back from the brink of war with Syria, and failing to respond to the deteriorating security environments in both of these countries in a timely manner, the Obama administration has expended much of America's political-military credibility already. Today, the international community seeks to help broker ceasefires in both Libya and Syria, sponsor talks between certain warring parties, and oversee the creation of new governments. Although the United States is playing a leading role by working through international channels, such efforts may ultimately not amount to much if the local actors on the ground wish to keep on fighting.⁴⁵

A Way Forward

Overall, the main problem with adhering to a state-building approach is the United States lacks a workable blueprint for how to go about rebuilding failed states successfully. Since the onset of the Global

45 On the international community's most recent efforts to broker ceasefires between the warring parties in Libya and Syria, see The Associated Press, "Libyans Urged to Accept Cease-Fire, Embrace UN Unity Plan," *New York Times*, December 13, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/12/13/world/europe/ap-eu-libya.html>; Somini Sengupta and David E. Sanger, "After Years of War in Syria, U.N. Passes Resolution on Talks," *New York Times*, December 18, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/19/world/middleeast/syria-talks-isis.html?_r=0; and Anne Barnard, Maher Samaan, and Derek Watkins, "Signs of Hope Five Years After Start of Syria's War," *New York Times*, March 12, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/03/13/world/middleeast/syria-control-isis-maps-cease-fire-civil-war-five-years.html>.

War on Terror, America has spent a significant amount of blood and treasure in trying to rebuild Afghanistan and Iraq. However, the fact is Washington has not succeeded in stabilizing either. This is clearly evident in the fact that, after the US military withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, the Iraqi government and its military forces showed themselves to be completely incapable of halting ISIL's takeover of large portions of territory. The same can be assumed about Afghanistan, for Washington's decision to remain military engaged in this country post 2016 signals that the United States harbors serious doubts as to whether or not the Afghan government and its military forces can withstand a Taliban offensive without sustained US military support. The historical record reveals America has rebuilt states following the cessation of armed conflict, most notably in Germany and Japan in the aftermath of the Second World War. But the United States is currently trying to rebuild failed (not functional) states in war-torn, ethnically diverse societies which have been historically defined by an absence of democracy, economic underdevelopment, and patrimonial-based rule.⁴⁶ As such, any US blueprint based upon the state-building successes of post-war Germany and post-war Japan is rather useless in terms of its ability to serve as a guide for state rebuilding efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and/or Syria.

So, how should America proceed? In its war against ISIL the United States has sought to obstruct the group's own state-building efforts by authorizing raids led by Special Operations Forces on targets, inserting a small contingent of expeditionary units into Iraq and Syria to assist local forces, and waging war from the skies.⁴⁷ While there are considerable virtues to this strategy, Iraqi forces are still not able to expel ISIL from all of its major strongholds, and no Sunni Arab force exists in Syria which could possibly defeat the terrorist group on the ground.⁴⁸ Any further US military involvement should thus coincide with the founding and fitting of a professionally trained local military force that is capable of asserting legitimate authority and providing security over liberated areas once ISIL has been forcefully evicted. Conceivably, the same model could also be replicated in Afghanistan and Libya to some degree, provided that the United States is able to find local partners on the ground and establish productive channels of cooperation with neighboring states. In Afghanistan and Iraq, Washington should continue to work with the national armies along with any supportive units that have received a proper vetting. In Libya and Syria, locating, training, equipping, and organizing new professional military forces will prove to be a much more arduous task, namely, because local actors may prefer to fight against their respective host governments (or may not

46 See Bellin, "The Iraqi Intervention and Democracy in Comparative Historical Perspective." See also Downes and Montan, "Forced to Be Free? Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Rarely Leads to Democratization."

47 For an overview of US strategy against ISIL, see W.J. Hennigan, "US to Send about 200 More Special Operations Troops to Iraq to Fight Islamic State," *Los Angeles Times*, December 1, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-fg-carter-special-operations-20151201-story.html>.

48 Rukmini Callimachi, "US Seeks to Avoid Ground War Welcomed By Islamic State," *New York Times*, December 7, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/08/world/middleeast/us-strategy-seeks-to-avoid-isis-prophecy.html?_r=0.

wish to work together).⁴⁹ That said, the amassing of professional military forces in Libya and Syria is absolutely necessary since they are needed to vanquish ISIL and its affiliates. In brief, the absence of such forces at present inhibits the founding of political order within these fractured societies. By working towards the peaceful resolutions of these armed conflicts in the United Nations the international community can assist with the building of such forces over time.

Thereafter, the United States would need to concentrate its efforts on orchestrating economic recoveries and providing social services within these countries as hostile forces are eradicated, for no new state can come to acquire legitimacy if ordinary people under its rule sparsely trust one another and remain hopelessly unable to earn a decent living.⁵⁰ Economic development, social reconciliation, and the revival of ordinary life would thus need to follow closely behind the cessation of major combat operations. Lastly, it would likely be necessary for the United States and/or other member states of the international community to maintain an indefinite yet nominal military presence within some (or possibly all) of these countries so as to provide new states with the opportunity to consolidate as inexperienced leaders learn how to properly enforce their rule and cultivate genuine legitimacy. Of course, however, this blueprint for rebuilding failed states is quite vague. What then should be done to kick-start state-building efforts within these countries?

In Afghanistan, if Washington seeks to stabilize this country, the United States will need to retain a sizeable military presence there for well into the foreseeable future, for state-building arguably cannot continue without a sustained US military presence. To realize a state-building aim, one of the primary objectives of the US government should be to get the Taliban leadership to engage in negotiations with the Afghan government (in regards to resolving this armed conflict), but with America's adversary negotiating from a position of weakness. Negotiations should not take place until it appears the Afghan government possesses the capability to stand on its own volition. Yet herein lays the other problem facing the United States in Afghanistan: America cannot help build a legitimate and durable political system if it remains sitting atop an extremely unstable economic foundation. The main weakness of the Afghan government is the Afghan economy. for as long as the opium industry remains consistently intact, the legitimacy and capacity of the Afghan government will remain weak. To achieve a lasting peace in Afghanistan, the drug trade needs to be undermined effectively. Combatting the drug trade may well sound irrational, but it is necessary. To move forward, the United States will have to take a few steps backward in Afghanistan first.

49 Regrettably, the Obama administration has halted plans to amass such a military force in Syria owing to the lackluster results of this program to date. On why the program to build a professional military force consisting of Syrian fighters has failed thus far, see Michael D. Shear, Helene Cooper, and Eric Schmitt, "Obama Administration Ends Effort to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS," *New York Times*, October 9, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/middleeast/pentagon-program-islamic-state-syria.html>.

50 On the importance of ensuring the delivery of social services, overseeing the recovery of economic activities, and building "trust" in post-conflict societies, see Jennifer A. Widner, "Building Effective Trust in the Aftermath of Severe Conflict," in Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 222-236.

Iraq appears to be on the precipice of breaking apart along ethno-sectarian lines. To counteract this dangerous trend, the United States should continue to assist the Iraqi army in reasserting control over territories captured by ISIL. In adhering to such a strategy with Iraqi forces in the lead, it is essential that the Iraqi government come to govern in a more accountable manner. Assuming that ISIL is eventually dislodged from its remaining strongholds, Baghdad will need to reacquire its legitimate authority over these population centers. This can only be achieved if local elites refrain from implementing discriminatory policies. By now, ISIL's blitz across the western deserts of Iraq and capture of multiple cities has hopefully sent a message to Iraq's elites: the practice of exclusionary politics in the present only courts disaster in the future.

Libya is not as vital to the United States in terms of national security interests at the moment. Nevertheless, the Libyan state has imploded since Gaddafi's overthrow and Libya harbors the potential to become a collapsed state on par with Somalia circa the 1990s should the international community not lend a helping hand in this moment of need. Bearing this in mind, the path to stabilizing Libya must begin at the political level. If a political solution can be brokered with the aid of the United Nations, then Libya can initiate the process of constructing a professional military force to establish governmental authority within its borders. In time, the Libyan government (with foreign assistance) could theoretically eliminate the terrorist sanctuaries within its borders. Maintaining a lasting peace, however, may prove to be more difficult, and thus might necessitate Libya's acceptance of a (multinational) peace-keeping force.

Syria is the most vexing of the four countries as Assad remains firmly in control over a portion of the country. The United States government and the Syrian government currently fight against a common enemy (ISIL). But the legitimacy of the Assad regime is hollow, thereby making it a poor choice to lead any state-building effort. What remains unclear, however, concerns whether the Russian Federation may prove amenable to forcing Assad into accepting some type of power-sharing agreement with other local actors. As previously stated, the amassing of a professional military force in Syria is necessary in order for peace to prevail. It appears that the Syrian government (with Russia's backing) possesses the capacity to endure indefinitely. Still, the United States knows that governmental legitimacy must accompany the application of political authority in order for stability to arise. Based upon this assessment, perhaps Washington and Moscow should start focusing their efforts on trying to find some common ground in Syria. In the final analysis, the forces working against the rebuilding of Syria may prove to be too powerful to overcome. But we will only know this to a certainty when all of the other options available to the international community have been thoroughly exhausted.

Obviously, refashioning failed states into more effective and stable governing entities is an extremely long and laborious process filled with many potential pitfalls and setbacks. Nevertheless, as things seemingly stand now, state-building provides a way for America to address the mounting security concerns which exist in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria.

Conclusion

The United States currently finds itself at a crossroads. If America decides to cut its losses and adopt the position that rebuilding failed states is too costly, then the United States and the free world should brace for the (likely) rise of radical-inspired states. Since such an outcome is perceived by many within the corridors of power in Washington as an unacceptable risk, America's war against radical Islam continues today. Assuming the United States wishes to keep on fighting the Global War on Terror by striving to neutralize terrorist organizations and quell insurgencies across the greater Middle East, Washington needs to (re) evaluate whether the current tactics being employed at its discretion to further its respective counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies are beneficial to US interests in the long run. In addition, the United States should consider placing some time, spatial, and resource limitations upon its involvement in the Global War on Terror, for continuing along the current course of waging multiple wars arguably amounts to an imprudent and tiring foreign policy doctrine with potentially dire consequences. Finally, the United States needs to define clearly what constitutes an American victory in the Global War on Terror, and create a set of reliable metrics to gauge America's progress to date.

The Global War on Terror largely persists due to ineffective governance across the Middle East, North Africa, and Southwest Asia. If the United States seeks to bring about definitive endings to the wars raging within Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria that are beneficial to America's interests, then Washington appears to have little choice but to become more involved in these countries. State-building stands as the best option available. However, the inherent danger in America becoming militarily engaged in multiple theaters throughout the greater Middle East lays with the hard fact that the United States cannot eliminate the enemies it faces unless they come to be replaced by new states that are capable of governing more effectively. Erecting resilient states out of the remnants of failed ones is no easy task. As a result of this unfortunate state of affairs, avoiding defeat in these protracted conflicts would therefore necessitate that Washington keep waging an uphill struggle for well into the foreseeable future.

