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ANARCHY IS THE NEW NORMAL: Unconventional Governance and 21st Century Statecraft

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When I was commissioned a Marine Corps officer in 1998, I was told to believe non-state entities were dangerous to U.S. national security. Whether forecasting the end of history or the clash of civilizations, the foreign policy scholars my seniors encouraged me to study pointed towards “ungoverned spaces” as the global hotspots where American warriors were most likely to fight. The concern grew when Afghanistan’s stateless areas served as staging grounds for the 9/11 attacks, and again in Iraq when the Coalition Provisional Authority

blamed postwar instability on a lack of good governance.

Having removed my uniform and traveled through many ungoverned—or, more accurately, unconventionally governed—spaces, I question the value of building national security policy around the need to develop states. Assumptions that good governance can only exist through state structures often result in flawed, ineffective policy responses that satisfy bureaucrats without altering ground conditions. Consider West Africa, where American officials are more concerned with financing capacity building programs to support dysfunctional states (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and so on) than identifying and influencing religious and tribal power brokers, even if they don’t hold formal elective office. And in Mexico, law enforcement in the six northern states collapsed without disrupting U.S.-Mexico trade volume, which grew from \$332 billion in 2006 to a record \$493.5 billion in 2012.

In Syria—or, more accurately, the coasts, mountains, rivers, and deserts that used to be Syria—Iranian, Saudi, and Russian sophistication is running circles around Western impotence. Washington policymakers have trapped themselves with binary options for responses to the civil war’s regional tensions. On the one hand, supporting even the most moderate opposition forces elevates Sunni extremists. On the other, allowing the Assad regime to retain power in Damascus further increases Iran’s regional influence. Given this dilemma, does the United States have an interest in developing flexible techniques that would produce alternative policy options matching the street savvy of our competitors? Assuming we do, how do we build those more nuanced approaches into our foreign policy toolbox?

From South Ossetia in the Caucasus to Somaliland in East Africa, much of the world operates under political structures that are difficult for American pundits and policymakers to understand, let alone influence. As [this map of geopolitical “anomalies”](#) illustrates well, anarchy is the new normal in the 21st century world.¹ Consequently, an initial step towards more perceptive policy approaches might be to manage, accept, or even encourage unconventional governance as a productive avenue through which American power could be regularly exercised. This approach would view unelected leaders in general, and ungoverned space in particular, as conditions to be

¹ See <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/files/2013/08/Revised-Map-Of-Geopolitical-Anomalies-1.jpg>.

effectively handled rather than problems to be permanently solved.

THE NEW NEW MEDIEVALISM

I am hardly original in predicting the 21st century will challenge the Westphalian state order. In 1994, Robert Kaplan warned of the “coming anarchy,” prognosticating a systemic nation-state collapse that would strain the planet’s social fabric.² In 2006, John Rapley wrote in *Foreign Affairs* of “the new Middle Ages,” identifying the patronage systems of Jamaican smuggling gangs as more effective at public security than government officials.³ Dr. Jakub Grygiel argued in 2009 that scholars should acknowledge “the power of statelessness” as a reason why many insurgents had little interest in controlling a modern state.⁴ The same year, novelist Steven Pressfield published “It’s the Tribes, Stupid,” a five-part video blog offered as an introduction to unconventional governance in Afghanistan based on historical research and hundreds of testimonies from U.S. military forces.⁵

Theoretical warnings of impending geopolitical chaos first emerged a generation earlier. In 1977, Australian international relations professor Hedley Bull published *The Anarchical Society*, arguing that state sovereignty had weakened to the point that the international system resembled what he called “new medievalism,” a system where authority and power functioned more through conglomerates, corporations, and city-states than actual government leaders.

U.S. national security leaders are traditionally taught to operate within the Westphalian model; ambassadors and combatant commanders seek and cultivate “strategic partnerships” with military and political authorities in other states. Even so, the U.S. government functions in many ways as Dr. Bull had predicted. Consider the role Erik Prince (Blackwater, Xe) played in deploying security contractors to Iraq, or the influence of George Friedman (Stratfor) on the U.S. intelligence community.⁶ The Edward Snowden espionage affair and Aaron Alexis shooting point to the U.S. military’s ongoing dependence on contractors.

But medievalism is not all negative, and city-state capabilities—which Bull predicted would grow as the Westphalian system devolved—can often be effective. The New York City Police Department has reduced violent crime over three decades with 34,500 uniformed armed officers, giving it a stronger military capability than two-thirds of the world’s countries. Does that mean the NYPD should have its own flag? Don’t be surprised: it does.⁷

Given the risk that disorder brings, Washington policymakers invariably fear power structures that aren’t aligned within the nation-state system. Government forces appear best suited for preventing terrorists from having land and resources to train for attacks. Al-Shabaab, the party responsible for the recent Nairobi attacks, developed their skills in Somalia’s ungoverned areas. Like in Iraq and Afghanistan, the nation-state system seems to be the best tool available for preventing terrorists and criminals from gestating, training, and plotting.

WEST AFRICA AND NONSTATE PARADIGMS

There’s nothing theoretically wrong with strengthening democratic institutions. But in West Africa, giving foreign aid for capacity building seems to have created as many problems as it solved. In early 2013, after receiving aid and training for years, American officials condemned Mali’s National Army (and their own training standards) for failing to halt radical Salafist forces from exploiting the Tuareg north. But Mali’s army is predominately Bambara, a tribe with little incentive to fight against Tuareg northern independence. Mali’s soldiers didn’t need more training on how to fight northern Salafist threats: they needed a reason to fight. Preserving Mali as a nation simply was not a strong enough incentive.

If American policymakers reconsider Mali’s security situation through a paradigm other than Westphalian structures and Bismarckian statecraft, they might reach different policy conclusions. By acknowledging the obvious—Tuareg leaders, not the Mali government, control northern Mali—Washington might also seek to

² Robert D. Kaplan, “The Coming Anarchy,” *The Atlantic*, February 1994.

³ John Rapley, “The New Middle Ages,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2006.

⁴ Jakub Grygiel, “The Power of Statelessness,” *Policy Review*, Hoover Institution, April 1, 2009.

⁵ <http://www.stevenpressfield.com/vblog/>

⁶ Suzanne Kelly, “Exposing Stratfor,” *CNN.com*, Security Clearance blog, February 28, 2012.

⁷ <http://www.nypdreruit.com/inside-nypd/nypd-history>

persuade the Tuaregs to become allies instead of enemies. Instead of teaching Malian soldiers tactics they already know and logistics they can never afford, officials could make clear that the United States fought the Tuaregs because their leaders chose to embrace radical Salafist Islam as an end to achieve independence, and not because the U.S. opposes a *de facto*, or even a *de jure*, independent Tuareg area.

While wantonly partitioning off the ethnic region might upset the president of Mali, doing so eliminates the uncomfortable and unnecessary façade that the national government is the country's most significant political force. That it is not is obvious to anyone in West Africa. As [FPRI's Ahmed Charai recently wrote](#), Morocco's King Mohammed VI carries regional influence based on his inherited Islamic title "commander of the faithful." The king's recent initiatives to promote religious moderation among radicalized Tuareg imams may preserve Washington's regional interests more effectively than any state-building endeavor ever could.⁸

MEXICO: GROWTH DESPITE WEAK GOVERNANCE?

In U.S. strategic terms, both the most and least significant state-building attempt since 9/11 took place in Mexico, where U.S. policy advisors collaborated directly with Mexican authorities to develop federal, state, and local governance during the country's drug war. Formally through the Merida Initiative, and informally with thousands of relationships in the U.S. Departments of State, Defense, Justice, and Homeland Security, the two countries bolstered funding for institutional development to new levels. Over six years, bi-national cooperation to build institutional capacity contributed to increasing security and reducing violence.

But the drug violence itself had little impact on the U.S.-Mexico trade relationship. This economic partnership was the primary geopolitical reason both countries had invested in the drug war in the first place, and was also what many analysts feared the carnage would damage. As it turned out, binational manufacturing consortiums privatized security to meet local demand, and violence decreased labor costs south of the border. At the same time, U.S. border authorities focused enforcement on brokers and freight forwarders with known narcotics associations, which lowered transaction costs for traders who kept a clean slate.

Although the trade boom in both countries appears likely to continue even as violence wanes, capacity building in local security had no impact on stimulating economic growth or preventing fiscal collapse. The manufacturing sector on both sides of the border had incentives to prosper despite the violence, and businesses took measures they deemed necessary absent conventional governance. If 2013 projections hold, U.S.-Mexico trade will exceed over \$500 billion this year. Economically speaking, anarchy may have even proven oddly advantageous.

MANAGING SYRIA'S ANARCHY

Unlike in Mexico, political dysfunction in the northern Levant has only brought opportunities for extremists. Syria's civil war has destroyed the country, chased one of every three civilians from their homes, pulled in fighters from throughout the Muslim world, and made strange bedfellows of all involved. Shi'ite Hezbollah soldiers who fought Israel in 2006 now skirmish against Iraqi Sunni warriors who resisted, then allied with (and were trained by), U.S. military forces. Those same Sunnis have aligned with al-Qaeda supporters they previously opposed. In Syria, Americans see the Muslim Brotherhood as relative moderates compared to the remaining rebel pantheon. These "moderate" Brotherhood fighters have funneled arms and weapons in Syria to al-Qaeda sympathizers, and are now threatening the Kurds, who had previously stayed neutral in Syria's conflict.

In a region filled with guerrillas, militias, and paramilitaries, the Kurdish *peshmerga* stand out. Their estimated strength is around 300,000, although analysts hesitate to pinpoint a solid number. If estimates of the *peshmerga*'s size are accurate, they tie with France as the world's fifteenth largest army, which gives the Kurds greater manpower capability than both the Syrian state and the rebel opposition. And over the past two decades, the *peshmerga* have succeeded in their military objectives of securing autonomous Kurdish enclaves with overt and covert U.S. assistance.

Before the civil war, Syria's Kurdish regions were restive enough for the Assad regime to occupy them with Syrian soldiers. After the war started, Assad withdrew his troops from Kurdish areas and extended overtures to the Kurds

⁸ Ahmed Charai, "Soft Power, Hard Results in North Africa," *FPRI E-Notes*, September 2013.

for loyalty, including a diplomatic envoy to the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil. In the meantime, Erbil has quietly filled the security void in Syria's Kurdish areas with *peshmerga* soldiers who are based in Iraqi Kurdistan. Despite Iraqi Kurdistan's security guarantees, Syrian Muslim Brotherhood members kidnapped 30 Kurds in early September, forcing them to pledge their support for Sharia law and "the real Islam." The Muslim Brotherhood's actions suggest the Syrian opposition has as much, or more, to fear from the Kurds as the Assad regime.

Despite their religious moderation, political loyalty, and military capability, U.S. policymakers rarely discuss the Kurdish role in Syria. It is considered too volatile, a diplomatic taboo of sorts among proper statesmen. Unfortunately, statelessness makes the Kurds a geopolitical mistress. American policymakers dally when need requires, but leave them alone when serious regional options are discussed.

Although the *peshmerga* have remained neutral in Syria's civil war, there's little doubt they would enter forcefully if either side threatened to occupy Syria's Kurdish enclaves. If Syria is moving towards an indefinite state of anarchy, as all assessments indicate, the United States would be wise to acquire and sustain regional asymmetric influence. Next to the Israelis, the Kurds are the most consistent U.S. ally in the region. They have no love for Hezbollah or al-Qaeda, and are geographically well suited to work as American partners in the Levant. Since radical Shi'a and Sunni influence appear likely to be present in Syria for some time, it seems prudent to invest in a strong, proactive relationship with a potent regional force.

Overtly arming Kurdish fighters in Syria would not necessarily provide the United States with immediate geopolitical advantage in either toppling the Assad regime or rebuilding the Syrian state. On the contrary, arming the Kurds, even defensively, would threaten the Turks, inflame the Iranians, and stoke Syrian sectarianism to even worse levels than it already is.

But geopolitics is chess, which means Washington needs to plan for not just today's crisis, but the series of crises likely to result from the troubles of the moment. Lebanon and Iraq, two of Syria's five geographic neighbors, are hollow states at best, and nobody wants to add Syria, lest the entire Levant start to look like Somalia. Unfortunately, as the Rolling Stones put it, you can't always get what you want.

THE NORMALCY OF STATELESSNESS

In the 15th and 16th centuries, before Westphalia's accord brought the nation-state system, feuds between Rodrigo Borgia (Pope Alexander VI), Giuliano della Rovere (Pope Julius II), and the Orsini, Colonna, and Medici families (among others) provided both motivation and resources for armies throughout what is now Italy to coalesce, defend, and fight over territory and treasure.

Since anarchic times have clearly arrived, this paradigm may offer a more accurate sense of what 21st century statecraft and security policy in much of the world may look like.

It is difficult for American policymakers to accept that many of the world's regions may be stateless for years to come. But seeing political disorder as the geopolitical equivalent of a mosquito bite rather than a malaria outbreak acknowledges a truth we instinctively know: the world does not appear destined to carve itself into two hundred liberal democracies anytime soon. The new medievalism's tenets will apply not just in troubled areas (the Levant), or paradoxical ones (the U.S.-Mexico border) but also in well-governed regions (Manhattan) as they depend on their own city-state structures for security.

Current events suggest Washington must learn how to maintain U.S. interests within a political framework where anarchy is the norm. Doing so requires more than "working with" tribes; it requires making policy about tribes. In East Africa, American and European officials have discreetly grown comfortable depending on Somaliland and Puntland clan authorities to secure northern Somalia. Despite their own internal border dispute, officials from these two unrecognized regions have proven useful in regional struggles against piracy and al-Shabaab. In the coming decades, alliances with Somaliland and Puntland clan leaders may prove more useful in crafting regional policy than any emergent Somali state in the "capital" of Mogadishu.

As the 21st century unfolds, anarchy should certainly not be an aspiration. The nation-state system is clearly the most productive, peaceful and profitable way for people across the world to coexist. But it is not how many of the

world's most troubled regions actually relate to each other, or to their local and international neighbors. Consequently, Washington should become comfortable leveraging city-states, conglomerates, and clans alongside great powers, grand strategy, and good governance. The practice of statecraft must evolve to consider using, rather than preventing, the power of statelessness. As Dr. Bull concluded, "It is better to recognize that we are in darkness than to pretend that we see the light."⁹

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⁹ Hedley Bull. *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*. Columbia University Press, 1977, p. 312.