

4 June 2012

Moving Towards Weak and Failed States

From de-colonization to the end of the Cold War and beyond, Central and the Horn of Africa have been blighted by political violence and state failure. Today we trace the regions' march towards fragility.

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In recent years, many of the countries of Central and the Horn of Africa have become bywords for state failure and intra-state conflict. A host of international actors and organizations have in turn attempted to resolve the regions' disputes through a combination of mediation, economic assistance and humanitarian aid. Yet the social, economic and political development of both regions continues to be compromised by ethnic tensions, geopolitical rivalries and fragile state institutions. In order to better understand the causes of conflict and state failure across Central and the Horn of Africa we today consider some of the long-standing social and economic problems that continue to plague both regions. In doing so, we find that past historical experience and control of natural resources make a solid contribution to the fragility of both regions'.

Lines in the Sand

The borders of many African states remain a legacy of the colonial powers that dominated the continent from the late 19th century until as late as the 1970s. In many cases the European 'scramble for Africa' cut through ethnic affinities and tribal identities that had existed long before colonialism. According to our partners at Chatham House, prevailing diplomatic convention argues that these boundaries should nevertheless remain in place. In doing so, the colonial boundaries would prevent the opening up of a Pandora's Box of competing territorial claims. Yet in parts of Central Africa this often resulted in the continued wielding of colonial power by post-colonial states.

Accordingly, key Central African states saw the process of democratization subverted by the interests of either distinct political classes or tribal affiliations. The emergence of 'strongman rule' in states like Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Uganda not only led to the marginalization of society along ethnic lines, but also widespread corruption and economic development that benefitted the few. Indeed, where natural resources were exploited for wealth generation, such forms of governance inevitably led to the emergence of powerful cliques with a vested interest in maintaining the political status quo. As a result, rulers such as Uganda's Idi Amin or the Central African Republic's Jean-Bédel Bokassa used colonial instruments of power to rule their countries with an iron fist.

Indeed, many regimes and ruling elites also employed norms inherited from the colonial period to

'divide and rule' along ethnic lines. The political fallout from Kenya's disputed elections in 2007, for example, resulted in an upsurge of ethnic violence and the deaths of 1,200 Kenyans. To further complicate matters, when previously marginalized ethnic groups assume power, they also take on the same characteristics as their predecessors. As part of a phenomenon labeled by the Oxford Research Group as 'our turn to eat', the new ruling class assumes the colonial instruments of power and rules in a similar fashion to the previous regime.

However, it could be argued that the 'lines drawn in the sand' by the colonial powers do not adequately explain the Horn of Africa's descent into violence and chaos. With the exception of a brief period of occupation by Mussolini's Italy, Ethiopia has never been effectively colonized. Moreover, South Sudan's secession from the North in 2011 also demonstrates that the colonial borders drawn here are perhaps less durable than in other parts of the African continent. Yet the formation of new states such as Eritrea and the de facto separation of Somaliland from Somalia nevertheless cut through the communities of the region just as much as the colonial borders.

As a result, social, linguistic and ethnic ties continue to be divided by borderlines in the modern Horn of Africa. The case of the region's Somali-speaking community amply demonstrates this point. Beyond the borders of Somalia, ethnic Somalis also live in parts of Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti. Accordingly, the overlap of ethnic communities - particularly in the border regions - may provide opportunities for grievances and political unrest to sporadically occur. Some of the most porous borders in the world potentially allow ethnic minorities to supply rebels with arms and money to fight insurgencies in other states. Yet providing moral and material support to rebellions in other countries does not necessarily have to be based on ethnic ties. During Eritrea's war of independence with Ethiopia, Sudan provided support to Eritrean rebels, despite have little in the way of close ethnic affiliations with them.

A Continent Awash with Weapons

Khartoum's support for Eritrea not only demonstrates that geopolitics impacts upon armed conflict in both regions, it also reflects that many regional paramilitary struggles have access to an ample supply of small arms and light weapons. Many arms in circulation throughout Central and the Horn of Africa were originally supplied by the rival Cold War blocs to countries such as Ethiopia in the name of ideology, and also to fight proxy wars. But instead of the Cold War ending the steady supply of weapons, arms dealers began to flood Africa with surplus stock from the former Soviet bloc. And despite better regulations, the world's leading arms exporters - including the United States - often accounted for over 50% of all arms sales across the continent.

When combined with an undercurrent of ethnic tension, the abundance of small arms have the potential to make the political conditions of Central and the Horn of Africa increasingly fragile. Further exacerbating the situation are the undemocratic and neo-patrimonial regimes that favor bribery and corruption over effective governance. While states such as DRC and have in the past agreed with a host of conflict resolution proposals, governments have often failed to effectively reintegrate rebel fighters back into society. Ineffective demobilization strategies and relatively easy access to weapons have, therefore, done little to address some of the root causes of conflict across these regions.

Resource Curses

Relatively easy access to weapons also goes a long way to determining who controls access to the regions' natural resources. Control of mineral resources in turn fuels the development of 'war economies', whereby warring factions not only benefit from the misappropriation of funds generated by sales, but also from opportunities to continue financing intra-state conflict. In the case of the DRC, for example, conflict has often been sustained by the sales of copper, zinc and timber to the clients from the developed world and, increasingly, China. And in the case of both Central and the Horn of

Africa whoever controls access to natural resources often holds the reins of power.

Accordingly, revenues generated by natural resources are subject to mismanagement and the personal enrichment projects of the region's corrupt and undemocratic regimes. Such 'projects' in turn overlook the social and economic needs of the majority of the population and reinforce instruments of colonial power. This inevitably creates a situation where the majority of the population of Central and the Horn of Africa live in abject poverty, despite an abundance of natural resources that continue to enhance the economic development of ruling cliques. In doing so, Africa's natural resources combine with past history to make the continent seem like it is constantly locked in a cycle of conflict.

The Way Forward

Over the course of this week, we will outline how a host of international actors are trying to resolve the myriad problems confronting Central and the Horn of Africa. Based purely on our analysis, it seems apparent that the international system is dealing with a set of long-standing and complex problems. And while international actors have had some success in ameliorating some of the most pernicious aspects of state failure, they clearly still have more to do. For that reason, we will also be considering the impact that 'local solutions' are having upon seemingly 'local problems'. Indeed, given that these solutions are likely to be made difficult by borders that often overlook ethnic affinities, it remains to be seen how much impact they are likely to have on the problems confronting Central and South Africa.

Editor's note:

For more content on the Central and Horn of Africa region, please see our [dossier](#) on the topic.

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[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

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