THE MYTH OF ‘UNGOVERNED SPACE’ – SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR EXOGENOUS STATE-BUILDING AND HUMAN SECURITY

Mats Berdal

Heightened anxiety in the West about ‘ungoverned territories’ was a direct consequence of the events of 9/11. The analysis and dominant policy prescriptions proposed for dealing with them, however, can be traced back to the ‘state failure’ debates of the 1990s, when many Western analysts and policymakers came to view the ‘building’ of modern liberal states along Weberian lines as the solution to the scourge of civil war in the post-Cold War era. In fact, while the underlying motives for engaging with ‘failed states’ in the 1990s and ‘ungoverned space’ after 2001 may have differed, the diagnosis of the core challenge that needed to be addressed rested on fundamentally similar assumptions.

The notions of ‘state failure’ and ‘ungoverned space’ both reflect, whether implicitly or explicitly, what may be crudely summarised as the Weberian conception of the state, of the legal-rational bases of legitimate authority and of the proper source of political order. Central to this is the understanding of the state as a geographically circumscribed entity within which, through a set of formal institutions, it asserts a monopoly of governance, rule-making and the legitimate use of violence. With these powers, the state generates legitimacy through the provision of public goods, foremost among them protection and security. Where these conditions are critically weakened legitimacy seeps away, political order disintegrates and states may, in extremis, ‘collapse’, leaving behind ‘ungoverned territories’. Exogenous state-building may be viewed as an attempt by outsiders to reconstitute states in order to prevent the descent into ‘ungovernability’, or, more positively (as in the discourse of the 1990s), help lay the foundations for lasting peace and human security. Either way, state-building thus conceived rests on a mechanical, technocratic understanding of state failure. Its aim, borrowing the words of a well-known English nursery rhyme, becomes to ‘put Humpty Dumpty back together again’.

While superficially compelling, the actual experience of ‘post-conflict’ peace- and state-building over the past three decades has brought the limits of such an approach into sharp relief. Specifically, the experience has shown that the simple yet evocative notion of ‘ungoverned space’ is in fact profoundly unhelpful, analytically as well as empirically. In reality, what Western policymakers have routinely described as ‘ungoverned spaces’ – whether in Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, or along the Venezuelan-Colombian border – is in fact a complex amalgamation of a variety of competing and often intersecting political forces, economic structures and social norms. As such, it is not a monolithic ‘space’ but rather a heterogeneous mosaic of human activity, patronage networks and institutional voids. To address this reality, state-building efforts need to be more contextually sensitive and adaptive, taking into account the specific historical, cultural and political dynamics of each region. This means moving beyond the simplistic notion of ‘ungoverned space’ and embracing a more nuanced understanding of the challenges facing these areas.

In conclusion, the myth of ‘ungoverned space’ serves as a powerful example of how dominant narratives can shape our understanding of the world and influence policy decisions. By recognizing the limitations of the Weberian framework and adopting a more flexible and contextually informed approach to state-building, we can better address the complex challenges facing many parts of the world.
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can be predatory in nature, geared towards personal enrichment through the
capturing of criminal rent and/or the exploitation of vulnerable civilian populations. Strategies of adjustment can also, however, be less about predation than about taking the necessary steps required to survive and cope in a world where the state no longer provides security, effective rule or basic life-sustaining services. Indeed, the response of local communities to such circumstances has often been to create informal arrangements that eventually have crystallised into what Ken Menkhaus has described as systems of ‘governance without government’. As observed by René Lemarchand of Eastern Congo, such systems may provide the basis for more durable political settlements. Still, while sometimes lauded as ‘organic’, ‘bottom-up’ and ‘authentic’ processes, alternative systems of governance should not automatically and everywhere be treated as the most promising basis for addressing human security needs; as indicated above, local adaptations to state failure and insecurity can also be, and have often proved to be, exploitative, violent and illiberal. More often than not, the calculations and motives of local actors are likely to be complex and varied, reflecting their particular circumstances and thus resisting simple characterisations – a reality that emerges clearly from studies of the war in Afghanistan as viewed from the perspective of local Afghans.

The key point here – and also a key lesson for policymakers – is that violent conflict and state weakness, rather than being viewed merely as anarchic and ‘chaotic’, must be understood as a distinctive political economy of war and peace; one given by the range of interests and the functional utility that some see in their perpetuation. In other words, what must be analysed are the alternative systems of power, influence and economic activity that crystallise within conflict zones, and, more specifically, the interaction of local war economies with the political agendas of conflict actors. This is no easy task, not least because political economies mutate, often rapidly, in response to external and internal stimuli, but policymakers wishing to assist in creating conditions that stand a chance of enhancing human security in conflict zones have no other option. The value of political economy analyses, as Suhrke, Goodhand and Bose observe, is that it helps to ‘deconstruct and denaturalise the idea of the Weberian state, blurring the binary distinctions between state and non-state, legitimate and illegitimate, and highlighting the networks, coalitions and material foundations that underpin or undermine the state’. Even if such analysis does not provide clear-cut answers in terms of how best, if at all, to intervene, it directs decision-makers towards the kinds of questions that must nonetheless be asked. These include: Where does real power – that is, networks of privilege and patronage that have evolved during conflict – lie in ‘post-conflict’ states? Which informal practices and actors can be formalised without threat to overall long-term political stability? What is the risk that exogenous state-building initiatives will, rather than securing improvements in insecurity, merely entrench the power and influence of actors with a vested interest in weak states and instability?

Peace- and state-building processes should never be viewed primarily as a matter of institutional capacity narrowly conceived. The deeper challenge lies in finding and effectively supporting a political settlement that takes account of the formal as well as the informal distribution of power, influence and resources within society. The notion of ‘political settlement’ here should not be confused with the formal signing of a peace accord – even though such accords ideally should and, on occasion, have been underpinned by less formal understandings of the rules forged among social groups and elites. Reaching a political settlement means reaching an agreement on those ‘rules’, and making the search for such a settlement more central to the activities of external actors engaged in state- and peace-building means shifting focus away from institutional capacity as such to consider the underlying structures of power and influence in society. This, in turn, necessarily entails a broader conception of the ‘state’ to include informal actors and networks that have prospered in the course of conflict and have sometimes benefited from persistent state weakness. This is essential because a functioning and inclusive political settlement – one in which key actors see themselves as having a long-term stake – rather than just state capacity is necessary for building legitimacy across society for any new ‘post-conflict’ dispensation.

* This TNote is an abridged version of the original article, which has been published in full in Italian on Human Security.

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