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From Hubris to Irrelevance: The Demise of the Western State-building Project

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ACRONYMS

ANA	Afghan National Army
CSG	Centre for Security Governance
IDLO	International Development Law Organization
UN	United Nations
UNDP	UN Development Programme
UN DESA	Department of Economic and Social Affairs

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The unceremonious collapse in 2021 of the Western-driven state-building process in Afghanistan appears to have sounded the death knell for the broader state-building concept. Confidence in the concept, which had become a cornerstone of international development and security policy in the aftermath of the Cold War, had already been shaken by a series of setbacks in countries ranging from Kosovo and East Timor to Iraq and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Indeed, an overview of the performance of state-building projects over the past two decades shows that its idealistic liberal prescriptions have rarely been realized in practice. The Western champions of state building have begun to turn their back on the concept, but the next direction they will take to address the persistent problem of fragile and conflict-affected countries is not yet clear. This thought paper will deconstruct the checkered history of state building to explore what form the post-state-building mode will take. The problems of weak local legitimacy, rampant corruption and a lack of sustainability that have consistently plagued state-building projects figure prominently in emerging discussions about a successor concept. While the precise contours of a post-state building framework have yet to be defined, there are indications that several themes will be influential, such as an emphasis on politically sensitive programming; more attention to local ownership and resilience; and a focus on more modest aid footprints. It appears that pragmatism will be the *modus operandi* for the post-state-building mode. This paper aims to contribute to a more fulsome debate over the future of international assistance to countries emerging from conflict and acute instability, because even though international assistance in this area has had a troubled legacy, the needs on the ground remain as great as ever.

INTRODUCTION

When the Taliban captured Kabul in August 2021, it not only ended a two-decade, multi-billion-dollar effort to build a Western-oriented Afghan state, but also sealed the demise of the international state-building project. The United Nations (UN) and Western donor states had gradually been turning their back on state building for almost a decade, but the collapse of Afghanistan seemed to officially close the chapter on the state-building era. A string of setbacks and outright failures exposed the deep-seated deficiencies and internal contradictions of the state-building concept. The idealistic liberal prescriptions of the concept, developed in the heady and triumphalist days for the West in the aftermath of the Cold War, were never realized. As the dust settles, there are signs of a pragmatic turn in how the UN and key donor stakeholders approach conflict-affected and fragile states. Whether it is a repackaging of the former model, a return to Cold War-era realpolitik or the emergence of a wholly new type of engagement remains unclear.

This thought paper will offer a brief history of the state-building era, looking at how the concept evolved and was applied in a series of conflict-affected countries from Bosnia and Kosovo to Iraq and Afghanistan. It will break down the record of state building and identify the four main factors that contributed to its poor performance. Finally, the paper will look at emerging post-state-building approaches to fragile and conflict-affected states and speculate on the directions they are likely to take in the years ahead. This paper aims to contribute to much needed debate over the future of international assistance to countries emerging from conflict and acute instability. While key members of the international community may have walked away from the state-building concept, the challenges that it was created to address are as pressing as ever.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF STATE BUILDING

The fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War spurred a wave of ambition in the West to remake the world in its own image. The mood of this period was captured well by the American academic Francis Fukuyama (1993), who argued "that humankind had reached the (liberal) endpoint in its ideological evolution." It was, as Fukuyama saw it, the "end of history," with liberalism the last ideology standing. This triumphalism spurred what Roland Paris (2010: 340) has called a "global experiment in post-conflict peacebuilding." The idea animating this grand experiment was "that rapid liberalization would create conditions for stable and lasting peace in countries emerging from civil conflict" and "that democratization and marketization were mutually reinforcing" (ibid.: 337-365). The state was seen as the principal guarantor and delivery system for the liberal peace, hence a deep and symbiotic connection between the peace-building and state-building agendas emerged, to the point where the terms were often used

interchangeably in policy and academic literature (see Call and Wyeth, 2008; Lederach, 1997). Fukuyama (2005) laid out the interconnections between the two processes under the umbrella of the liberal peace with a particular take on sequencing: "Before you can have a democracy, you must have a state, but to have a legitimate and therefore durable state you eventually must have democracy." State building soon came to be seen as the *sine qua non* of the liberal peace-building project.[1] Unlike previous eras of colonial occupation, this process was always intended to be time-limited. David Chandler (2019) describes how from "its inception…statebuilding was understood as a field of temporary external policy-intervention with the intention of transforming post-conflict or conflict-prone territories into sovereign authorities, capable of governing on the basis of liberal constitutional frameworks, market freedoms, democracy and the rule of law." Adherents to the new state-building ethos believed that with the right institutions and governance structures — conforming to liberal democratic principles and free markets — peace, justice and prosperity would inevitably follow.

The Western Balkans, more specifically Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, became key early test cases for the new state-building agenda in 1992 and 1998 respectively. It is important to note that during the early days of the post-Cold War period state-building projects were often referred to as nation-building given that they aspired to encourage the formation of new nations in countries fraught by internecine conflict. The experience in Bosnia dispelled any notions that external actors could galvanize and shape national identities, as the Dayton peace process and the international trusteeship that managed it served more to entrench and institutionalize existing nationalist divisions than to break them down. By the early 2000s, the term nation-building was largely shunned in favour of the more benign and technocratic state building.

Like in Bosnia, the state-building agenda in Kosovo was accorded an ambitious mandate. As Aidan Hehir (2019: 587) explains, "rather than just seeking to maintain peace and security, the statebuilding project in Kosovo aimed to create a pluralist, multi-ethnic democracy with an extensive array of human rights guarantees." The international trusteeship in Kosovo was able to dampen inter-ethnic tensions but made only limited gains in all other areas of the state-building agenda. Hehir shows how two decades after the launch of the state-building process "Kosovo continues to suffer from high unemployment, widespread corruption" and a robust "criminal elite [that] has to all intents and purposes captured Kosovo's political, economic and judicial institutions" (ibid.: 588). While neither Bosnia nor Kosovo have experienced a resurgence of violence and instability of the type seen in Afghanistan and Iraq, they have not come close to fulfilling the goals and expectations of state building. Indeed, both countries continue to rely on external aid and assistance to hold them together. As Chandler (2019: 545) argues, "even Kosovo's 'stateness' is in doubt, with no consensus on the recognition of its sovereignty among European Union members and the international community

similarly divided." State building has had a similarly underwhelming record in several other countries. In Somalia, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance, there has either been a resurgence of armed violence or a return of some semblance of authoritarian governance. East Timor has made some strides toward stability, but only began to make serious progress after international support was scaled down and the extent of the country's offshore oil wealth became apparent. Indeed, since the end of the Cold War there is not a single case study that could be held up as a clear exemplar of state-building success.

One of the central assumptions upon which the state-building agenda was built was that local actors would invariably desire the solutions that the liberal state-building process was proffering. In other words, state builders assumed that their programming would enjoy widespread local ownership and legitimacy. The experience in the Western Balkans and a series of other state-building cases shows that this assumption is deeply flawed. State building in many contexts is perceived by recipients as "alien and distant forms of institution-building" that usurps local agency and conflicts with more authentic and legitimate local structures and practices (Richmond, 2009: 328). In applying a Western lens to non-Western societies, state builders often adopt a distorted view of the local political, economic and socio-cultural milieu, fostering unsustainable and unintended outcomes (Ottaway, 2002: 1001-23).

Despite decidedly mixed results in its initial applications, Western countries doubled down on state building in the early 2000s. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, Western governments began to see failed and fragile states as an existential security threat. They were viewed as breeding grounds for terrorism, organized crime and other transnational security ills. In a 2002 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Robert I. Rotberg (2002: 128) asserted that the security of the international system was dependent on "a state's capacity to govern its own territory" thus the existence of these pockets of instability "not only threatens the lives and livelihoods of their own peoples but endangers world peace." Mark Duffield (2001: 16) noted at the time how "the question of security" in the international system had "almost gone full circle: from being concerned with the biggest economies and war machines in the world to an interest in some of the smallest." The international community could no longer allow states to fail because to do so would introduce a type of "contagion" in the international system. In 2008, Robert Zoellick, the president of the World Bank, stressed: "The diseases, outflows of desperate people, criminality, and terrorism that can spawn in the vacuum of fragile states can quickly become global threats." The George W. Bush administration's National Security Strategy issued on September 17, 2002, affirmed that "America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones…Weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states" (Quoted in Englehart, 2003: 20).

Some scholars at the time sought to quantify the damage that failed states could inflict, thereby justifying liberal interventionism on economic grounds. According to Lisa Chauvet and Paul Collier (2004), the average cost of a single failed state was US$82 billion and the presence of a fragile state not suffering from open conflict reduces economic growth rates in neighbouring states by an average of 0.6 percent per annum. With the average failing state having 3.5 neighbours, these growth losses added up to roughly US$237 billion per year (ibid.: 4). Despite such justifications, the contagion argument had a hollow and self-serving dimension to it. After all, many of the world's most dysfunctional states had festered for decades with little perceptible impact on the West and much of the international system. As Stewart Patrick (2011) argues, "the brutal truth is that the vast majority of weak, failing and failed states pose risks primarily to their own inhabitants" rather than other states. Even if you accept that technological innovation and economic globalization made the world smaller and more interconnected, failed and fragile states in the developing world were never existential threats to the international system, and state building was never going to be a panacea for global instability as some seemed to suggest.

The poster child of the emerging "state building as a defence" school was Afghanistan, which in the 1990s was an archetypal failed state and the base of operations for the international terrorist group, al-Qaeda, that had orchestrated the 9/11 attacks. It is perhaps not surprising then that Afghanistan became a pivotal case in the short history of state building and the tipping point in its demise. Initially, the international intervention in Afghanistan adopted a "light footprint" approach to supporting the fledgling post-Taliban regime. It was framed as an effort to promote local agency and ownership over the country's reconstruction. Lakhdar Brahimi, the first UN envoy to Afghanistan after the Taliban's fall, would later refer to this state-building-lite phase of the country's reconstruction as "original sin," as it did not reach the scale needed to address Afghanistan's immense development needs (Sedra, 2011). Over time, as the imposing challenges of constructing a stable democratic state in Afghanistan became clear, a much heavier footprint would emerge. The problem was, however, that as international engagement became more intensive, it crowded out local ownership and distorted local political and economic dynamics. The massive amount of resources that were being funneled through Afghanistan to accelerate progress and paper over setbacks had the perverse effect of nurturing corruption which metastasized at a massive scale. The problem was that the external state builders in Afghanistan were not prepared to manage the risks that an upsurge in assistance would generate and were never willing to sustain that elevated resource commitment long enough to consolidate real and enduring change.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, state-building efforts created edifices of stable proto-democratic states, but behind the curtain they were brittle and vulnerable. The Afghan National Army (ANA), one of the keystones of the Afghan state-building process, exemplifies this reality. The US regularly praised the ANA as one of the best trained and equipped forces

in the region. On paper, it was. However, low morale, high rates of desertion, attrition, corruption, factionalism and poor supporting institutions made it acutely prone to collapse, which it did in swift and stunning fashion in the summer of 2021 when it dissolved without a fight in the face of an advancing Taliban (Quoted in Sedra, 2022). The Iraqi army, while avoiding full collapse, has been comparably ineffective. Despite tens of billions of dollars of US support, it proved largely incapable of independently safeguarding the Iraqi state against a variety of threats ranging from Iranian-backed militias to the Islamic State. The Afghan and Iraqi cases showed that bigger interventions don't necessarily produce better results and in fact can do harm.

Even before the collapse of the Afghan government the experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan had pushed the West into what Marina Ottaway calls a "post-state-building mode." She explains that "the lack of success and the mounting costs of state-building operations made its abandoning inevitable" (Ottaway, 2020: 198). This shift in Western attitudes toward state building was first laid bare in 2011 after the Arab Spring revolutions in the Middle East, which turned Libya, Syria and Yemen into failed states. No grand state-building project was mooted for any of these countries, despite the geopolitical importance of the region. In the case of Libya, the West played a pivotal military role in overthrowing the Qaddafi regime but refused to carve out a significant role in managing the aftermath. There was no carefully contrived policy shift among the Western champions of state building. Rather the international community "simply drifted away from it, moving into a rather pessimistic and low-key post state-building mode, with low expectations that states can be turned around by international interventions and even lower willingness to commit money and efforts to the attempt" (ibid.: 193 194). In this new reality, as Chandler (2019: 550) argues, the United Nations has "moved to distance itself from 'statebuilding' and towards stressing peace in status quo terms of sustainability and local legitimacy rather than as an externally-led transformation conforming to preconceived goals and attained through externally managed social and political engineering." Building peace, as the logic goes, is not a linear process and cannot be achieved according to universal principles or templates. It involves negotiating change with local elites, processes and ideas.

This pragmatic turn to address fragile and conflict-affected states, a reaction to the unfettered liberal idealism of the 1990s, emphasizes that supply-driven and overly technocratic assistance is ineffective. Rather, external engagement should be limited to empowering local actors to implement local solutions, with much less consideration given to their compatibility with Western norms and standards. This is the era of "'good enough governance', where the international community enforces a minimal set of rights standards and key international security threats are dealt with and stability…[is] seen as more important than democracy" (ibid.: 545). It represents an implicit lowering of expectations in the ability of non-Western societies to achieve some of the fundamental goals of liberal state building. It also points to the new reality that Western donors are

not willing to contribute anywhere near the type of resources that would be required to undertake conventional state-building projects, at least in the absence of compelling strategic interests to do so. Jonathan Papoulidis (2022) sees the post-state-building mode as a move away from reinventing institutions in fragile and conflict-affected states toward making existing structures and actors more resilient in the face of complex risks. Such an approach relies more on negotiating local political coalitions and striking "mini-bargains" to achieve iterative progress rather than massive contributions of money and technical assistance.

In many ways, *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, the UN's "plan of action…to end poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions," exemplifies the drift away from the state-building paradigm leading up to the Afghanistan collapse (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA] and International Development Law Organization [IDLO], 2019). Launched in 2015, the Agenda and its 36 Sustainable Development Goals — the successor to the Millennium Development Goals — embraces a people-centred and inclusive approach to development, eschewing the state-centrism of previous eras. According to the UN Development Programme (UNDP) the Agenda aims to reframe the "social compact between state and society" ensuring "a match between people's expectations of what the state and other actors will deliver…and the institutional capacity available within the state and other actors to meet those expectations" (UNDP, 2016: 15). The Agenda prioritizes efforts to "build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels" (UN, 2015) but also implicitly recognizes the limitations of the state to deliver public goods in fragile and conflict-affected contexts as well as the challenges typically encountered by externally-driven processes to form and strengthen institutions. Instead of reaffirming fealty to state building, the Agenda emphasizes the need for inclusive and participatory approaches to governance programming that fosters greater engagement of local populations and civil society in all stages of programming. Developing locally owned solutions tailored to local conditions is the primary objective of the Agenda, not constructing institutions in line with a Western statist vision. But even the 2030 Agenda requires a level of external engagement in governance promotion in fragile and conflict affected states that may not be viable in a post-state-building world. Like many other international development, governance and security policy frameworks at present, the 2030 Agenda features both echoes of the previous state-building paradigm and signs of the disruptive change that has begun to set in.

What form the post-state-building mode will take is not yet clear, particularly because it has not yet been theorized by the donor community. What is clear is that the era of liberal state building is dead. This has been celebrated by many states in the international system — such as Russia, China and India — who have long seen liberal state building as a threat to the principle of state sovereignty which they regard as the inviolable core of

the international system. For her part, Ottaway (2020: 200) sees "no point in mourning the demise of an ineffective policy," but expresses doubts about whether the emerging practices and strategies of the post-state-building mode are able to address the very real risks of conflict-affected and fragile states. To overcome the "current stasis," as Chandler puts it, the international community must develop a more nuanced understanding of the factors that made the previous model untenable. The next section of this paper will break down those factors.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

While the state-building agenda followed different trajectories in the various contexts where it has been applied, a survey of cases shows significant commonalities in how it faltered. The following four factors had a particularly destabilizing effect on the process.

Hubris and Mission Creep

From its origins the state-building concept was rooted in the hubristic idea, as David Lake (2021) asserts, "that a foreign entity can parachute into a country and build a state that is both legitimate and loyal." Over time, the concept seemed to become more ambitious rather than less, seeking to engineer the creation of democratic states over relatively short time frames in countries that lacked traditions of either liberalism or strong state institutions. State building came to be a catch-all term that encompassed an extensive array of activities from the development of constitutional frameworks and social safety nets to the reform of security institutions and the promotion of civil society. Virtually all donor political, economic and security activity in recipient countries gradually came under the state-building umbrella, a fact that made the agenda exceedingly difficult to coordinate and manage. Western donors endeavored to implement this generational project within compressed development planning cycles often not exceeding a decade.

State builders seemed to assume that any institutions the process spawned would be inherently embraced by the local population. However, as Lake (2016: 198) points out, "institutions are not 'strong' or accepted by society simply because they are institutions." To acquire this essential legitimacy they must be built through inclusive processes and be anchored to local norms and traditions. Not only did donors often overlook the necessity of local ownership but they lacked clarity on how to effectively sequence a wide array of reforms. Doing everything at once not only confused stakeholders and challenged constrained budgets but opened the process to manipulation by internal spoilers. When you consider the amorphous nature of the state-building project and its often-unrealistic ambitions, it is not surprising that the emerging post-state-building mode has leaned so heavily to pragmatism and political realism.

The hard truth facing state builders since the end of the Cold War is that there is seemingly little correlation between the size of external state-building interventions and the quality and durability of the institutions they have created. Larger interventions have not produced better governance and more stable states. In fact, the opposite may be true. Perhaps the most successful recent examples of state building occurred in areas where external intervention was virtually non-existent, Somaliland and Eritrea. Johannes Jüde (2020: 99) shows how "both nations have established stable and working states in the context of a post-conflict environment." Neither conforms to Western standards of liberal democracy, with Eritrea in particular adopting autocratic practices, but they have avoided the type of widespread instability and violence that have plagued other recipients of state-building assistance. Somaliland provides a particularly instructive case for analysis given that it is an unrecognized breakaway region from Somalia, a country that has received significant state-building assistance since the 1990s. As Jüde notes, "while numerous externally sponsored initiatives trying to revive the state in Somalia have failed, scholarship highlights Somaliland's cooperative, self-organized process of state formation" (ibid.) What greater indictment of exogenous state building exists than examples of more effective processes of state formation in countries starved of external assistance and even recognition.

Overly Technocratic and Out of Touch with Local Realities

There is an assumption among stakeholders of the state-building project that if the right aid modalities, resources and capacities are deployed to a mission, regardless of the context, a universal form of peace and stability will inevitably emerge. This technocratic determinism is on full display in a 2006 article authored by Ashraf Ghani — who would serve as president of Afghanistan from 2014–2021 — along with Clare Lockhart and Michael Carnahan (2006: 119), where they diagnose the problem of failed states like Afghanistan and Somalia as being an "institutional syndrome" (ibid.: 119) that can be cured through their state-building blueprint. Ghani and Lockhart (2008) lay out this blueprint in detail in their book *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World*. In the book they outline a series of steps for the implementation of an effective state-building strategy and a framework of benchmarks to monitor and assess its progress. The outcome of state building, according to Ghani and Lockhart, merely comes down to "how the existing assets are mobilized and supplemented, and how the liabilities are understood and systematically reduced" (ibid.) This technocratic, template-driven model of state building is concerned more with supply-side resources than local needs and contextual conditions. According to this logic, the application of a particular formula for state building by an international cadre of experienced state-building professionals can produce success in any context.

Underlying Ghani and Lockhart's argument is an assumption, with little empirical evidence to support it, that local demand for the state-building project is invariably

strong. In fact, Ghani, Lockhart and Carnahan (2006: 118) assert that "considerable evidence exists supporting the claim that the citizens of countries recovering from conflict desire, first and foremost, the restoration or creation of a functioning and accountable state serving their legitimate aspirations." The authors fail to present or cite any of that "evidence." Such views can be attributed to what David Lake (2010: 278) calls "an end of history euphoria in which" the United States and other Western actors "assume that all governments [and peoples] will share its values and interests." There is indeed very little middle ground in how liberal peace builders and state builders perceive local actors. Groups seen to resist the liberal project are invariably "spoilers," while those who support it are "change agents." (Heathershaw and Lambach, 2008: 273). It is a powerful way to delegitimize dissent and reward supporters.

More often than not, state builders have failed "to recognize and address indigenous institutions and forms of authority" in recipient countries (Newman, 2010: 317). The project is infused with a "blank slate mentality" – that the local context is somehow historically, politically and socially empty – which invariably leads to top-down, donor-driven policies and approaches. Despite all of the donor rhetoric regarding local ownership – the need to tailor reforms to local contexts and carve out space for indigenous agency – the international community's approach to state building "has often ignored local realities, imposed development models paternalistically, operated with an instrumentalist understanding of local actors or deliberately excluded local actors that do not share its geopolitical worldviews" (Goetschel and Hagmann, 2009: 63). When state builders do engage with local political actors they tend to gravitate to like-minded Westernized elites, such as Ahmed Chalabi in Iraq, who may have technocratic credentials but characteristically lack high levels of local legitimacy. The inability and in fact unwillingness of the state-building project to engage and understand the "everyday" (Richmond, 2009: 334) in recipient societies – the customary and indigenous norms, customs, structures and actors that exist in recipient societies – has been the one of the model's biggest blind spots.

Costly and Unsustainable

State building is an immensely costly project usually undertaken in some of the most impoverished countries in the world. Even if Western state builders are able to erect a stable democratic proto state in one of these settings – a feat that requires immense amounts of resources akin to a World War II-era Marshall Plan – it would eventually have to be consolidated and sustained over the long term with local resources. This, as Ottaway (2020:197) argues "is one of the unsolved – and rarely mentioned – challenges of state-building, and one of the many reasons the idea has been quietly set aside by the international community, how to conceptualize, let alone build on the ground, a state that both meets international requirements for modern, responsible stateness and is affordable by a poor country." In many cases the prospect of indefinite international

subsidies and assistance becomes the only answer. However, such open-ended resource commitments are not realistic considering how fast donor strategic interests and priorities shift. The creation of unsustainable institutions that can buckle under the weight of funding shortfalls is acutely dangerous as it can trigger shockwaves within the state that can lead to its collapse. The reality is that too much money in certain circumstances can be as bad as too little.

The sustainability dilemma reveals a wider challenge in how donors fund state-building projects. There is a tendency among some donors, particularly the United States, to use money as a cure-all for a flawed or ill-defined strategy. If programs are performing poorly, fast infusions of money and other aid is often presented as the answer, with little consideration of local capacities to absorb and disburse those funds. This proclivity to spend out of problems has fueled rampant corruption in many fragile and conflict-affected states, undermining attempts to establish the legitimacy of nascent state institutions. Afghanistan offered a vivid example of this phenomenon, where massive outlays of donor aid, coupled with weak accountability and monitoring structures, facilitated the capturing of large parts of the state by a corrupt elite. This widespread corruption, more than anything else, laid the foundation for the collapse of the Afghan state. State builders never adequately grappled with this corruption challenge; it was treated by donors as a cost of doing business – a secondary concern – rather than the existential threat it clearly was.

Externally Driven

The state-building project has largely been advanced with external strategic objectives rather than local needs in mind. Those external objectives revolve around the advancing of Western security and counter-terrorism goals and the promotion of Western economic and political interests. In *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century*, Fukuyama (2004: 120) argued that "learning to do state-building better is central to the future of world order." However, in a 2005 paper on the same topic, he admitted that externally-driven state building "builds long term dependence, and may ultimately come to be seen as illegitimate to the locals" (Fukuyama, 2005: 85). This was the contradiction at the heart of the state-building agenda. On the surface, the project was dedicated to bringing security, stability and prosperity to populations in fragile and conflict-affected states, which would in turn foster regional and global peace and security. In practice, however, the agenda often overlooked the actual needs and desires of local populations, prioritizing external interests and modes of change. Barnett R. Rubin (2006: 184) captures this well in his reflections on how state building practice has evolved: "Studies of statebuilding operations often try to identify 'best practices' without asking for whom they are best." The emerging post-state-building mode has, as a result, placed extra emphasis on engaging "the everyday" and empowering local agency. Instead of driving change, there has been greater emphasis on seeing donors as facilitators of conditions conducive for local actors to lead and develop their own solutions.

WHAT'S NEXT? POSSIBLE FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR STATE BUILDING

The international community has never fully acknowledged the failings of the state-building model or disavowed it for the future. Rather, as Ottaway (2020: 198) explains, "the lack of success and the mounting costs of state-building operations made its abandoning inevitable. There was no outright rejection…it simply faded away." Given the lack of a blueprint for a post-state-building agenda, we can only assess some of the recent trends in international assistance to fragile and conflict affected states to gauge where the field is heading. The war in Ukraine has focused greater attention and urgency on this question of what will succeed the fading state-building paradigm. However, the fact that Ukraine is a middle-income country, has a functioning democracy — albeit imperfect — and will likely see even greater integration with Western Europe after the conflict ends, means that it should be seen more as an outlier when it comes to broader discussions on new approaches to fragile and conflict-affected states. Nonetheless, it will invariably serve as a focal point for dialogue and a potential testing ground for new approaches. The final section of this paper will identify several broad characteristics of a potential post-state-building mode that have gradually come into focus in recent years and require greater attention and analysis.

Pragmatism is the Order of the Day

A general pragmatism will pervade the post-state-building mode, which will prioritize local and organic solutions, negotiated with, and led by, local stakeholders. External interveners will be restrained in their interventions, avoiding large-scale commitments and excessive risk. They will also moderate their objectives, endeavoring to achieve "good enough" outcomes that may be less liberal but more in sync with local norms and practices.

More Focus on Local Stabilization

Interventions will be more apt to be hyper-local, focusing less on national level processes and institutions that are resistant to change. In other words, donors will likely become more opportunistic, dedicating resources to local actors or programs perceived to be champions of change. For instance, in Syria, Western donors invested in local coordination committees in opposition-held areas to fill governance gaps and bolster political opposition to the Assad regime (Brown, 2008). In other contexts, such localized assistance might take the form of supporting civil society actors or parts of local government. Broadly, this points to a donor approach that is more flexible and selective.

Smaller Aid Footprint

The post-state-building mode will likely be endowed with far fewer resources than its predecessor and will be driven by a "less is more" mindset. There will be less recurring budgetary supports for reforming institutions, which have been so prone to corruption and mismanagement in the past, and more focus on discrete projects. Time commitments may expand as donors have learned the danger of short-termist thinking, but the overall scope of missions will surely contract considerably.

More Outsourcing and Sub-contracting

There has been a trend for several years to outsource development, governance and security assistance under the umbrella of state building to private sector and civil society organizations. This trend is only likely to pick up momentum as donors seek a lower profile role in fragile and conflict-affected states because of their ever-increasing risk aversion. There has been a growing reticence over the past decade to deploy Western civilian and military personnel in unstable environments. During previous state-building projects this often meant that donor personnel were limited to heavily fortified compounds in capital cities, which prevented them from reaching a diverse cross section of the local population. The problem, as Abbey Steele and Jacob N. Shapiro (2017: 888) point out, is "that subcontracted state-building undermines the efficacy of state-building by external actors and it is unable to foster state legitimacy." Subcontracting, as Steele and Shapiro point out, creates problems with attribution, agency and accountability. Empowering contractors to implement projects misses an opportunity to attribute gains to the domestic government in a manner that would build legitimacy; it deprives local actors of agency to advance their vision for change; and it accords few tools to local actors to demand direct accountability from subcontractors. In many ways, this move toward subcontracting undercuts the wider turn to the local in the post-state-building mode.

More Co-existence with Counterterrorism Missions

The post-state-building mode will be more closely intertwined with counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations, a continuation of a trend that saw the gradual securitization of state building in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. This will mean more trade-offs of liberal reform objectives in favour of security imperatives. We have seen this trend of securitization in the Sahel region, where robust counterterrorism operations have worked in parallel with state building and reconstruction activities, often with ill effects for the legitimacy of the latter. Any pretense of being locally driven or people-centred is removed when programming is dictated by counterterrorism objectives, so this presents a distinct challenge to the evolution of a more locally attuned post-state-building mode.

CONCLUSION

The unabashed ambition and optimism that accompanied the development of the state-building agenda after the end of the Cold War has been replaced by uncertainty and a crisis of confidence among donors. Repeated failures to realize the lofty goals of state building have shaken the faith of the project's Western champions. This paper has shown that the state-building agenda was undercut by faulty assumptions, including the belief that recipient countries inherently wanted Western-oriented state institutions and that Western reconstruction templates could be seamlessly transplanted from context to context. State-building projects broke down in similar ways, regardless of geographic region or contextual conditions. They faced crises of domestic political legitimacy, corrosive levels of institutional corruption and clientelism, and problems of economic sustainability. All these issues came to a head in spectacular fashion in Afghanistan, where the collapse of the state-building project killed any lingering support for the agenda in the international community.

No heir to the state-building agenda has emerged to date, with the international community drifting into a post-state-building mode. This mode, while formally undefined, has featured several characteristics, from a more pragmatic outlook and smaller aid footprint to a greater emphasis on local ownership and political engagement. Undergirding these shifts is a greater focus on resilience as a locus of programming, an effort to build the capacity of local societies to cope with complex risks. However, plenty of questions remain unanswered about the new state-building mode. How will it balance the promotion of liberal democratic principles with its activities to advance local security and stability, particularly around counterterrorism? How will it work with non-state and informal actors and norms as part of its enhanced engagement with "the everyday"? And what steps will the process take to ensure the sustainability of programming and contain corruption? These questions are among many that must be addressed in the revisioning of the state-building agenda. There is no escaping the fact that the state remains the integral unit within the international community and the principal delivery system for development and governance assistance. With 80 percent of the world's poorest citizens living in fragile state settings (Papoulidis, 2022), there is no choice but to develop coherent policy strategies to address state failure and fragility. The United Nations and key international stakeholders — donor and recipient countries alike — need to come together to lay the blueprint for a new approach to fragile and conflict-affected states that recognizes the failings of the past and is uniquely equipped to meet contemporary challenges.

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NOTES

1. On the relationship between state building and peace building see Call and Wyeth (2008) and Francis Fukuyama (2004).

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