



State Fragility and Armed Conflict

Fragile states are countries that are extremely impoverished and have weak institutions. They have a very low capacity to fulfill the basic functions of a state, are poorly governed, and often experience political instability, including armed conflict. Armed civil conflict is both a cause and consequence of state fragility. Worse, fragility makes it likely that a state will experience conflict repeatedly, with violence restarting because the grievances that fueled rebellion in the first place remain unaddressed and the violence of war goes unpunished. In fact, most conflict onsets since the mid-1990s have been recurrences of earlier conflicts, many in fragile states. But conflict settlement periods are a window of opportunity for the international community to address state fragility in ways that make it less likely for conflict to break out again. Support for the negotiation of inclusive peace agreements, robust peacekeeping operations, and for building civil society and adopting political reforms can lead to durable peace even in the most fragile of states.

Brief Points

- Fragile states are unable to provide public services and cannot cope with major risks such as armed conflict.
- Fragile states are often affected by conflict, and are highly likely to see conflict recur.
- The international community has a unique opportunity to address state fragility in the aftermath of conflict through inclusive peace agreements, robust peacekeeping operations, capacity building of civil society organizations, and support for needed political reforms.

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What Is State Fragility?

“Fragility is the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks” (OECD 2016). Fragile states are poor countries that are generally unable to fulfill the basic functions of a state: to provide public goods to citizens, including law and order, services such as health and education, and the basic institutions for inclusive economic growth and political liberty. Such states are especially prone to environmental degradation and economic collapse, which can further exacerbate group-based grievances and inequalities. They are also generally highly corrupt. Fragility frequently results in major social and security crises, including protracted political crisis and instability, armed conflict, and the general escalation of both violence (both social and interpersonal) and social unrest.

The international community’s ability to address state fragility is limited. Externally inducing state development is extraordinarily complex and difficult. Vested interests and institutional stickiness stand in the way. Despite deep and entrenched poverty, government officials in poor, fragile states like Zimbabwe, Haiti, and Guinea Bissau have few incentives to obey international pressures for reform. Rather, fragility provides opportunities for personal enrichment and the maintenance of political power since institutions are dysfunctional.

The settlement of armed conflict, however, opens a window of opportunity for the international community to address factors that exacerbate state fragility through peacebuilding efforts. Peacebuilding does not necessarily aim to affect state capacity directly. Rather, through peacekeeping operations and the facilitation of inclusive peace agreements that promote the role of civil society and provide protection against government repression, the international community can at least reduce the chances of war recurrence.

Armed Conflict Is a Source and Consequence of State Fragility

Many fragile states are affected by violent, armed civil conflict. Poverty is a key cause of conflict: low levels of socio-economic development inhibit the building of stable and strong political institutions capable of mediating and quelling conflict efficiently. Fragile economies, and especially a lack of employment opportunities, make joining rebellion relatively more attractive than dismal

alternatives. Additionally, the lack of economic development can be an important grievance motivating individuals to join rebel organizations.

Conflict is “development in reverse”. Low levels of development lead to conflict and conflict in turn leads to even lower levels of development. Festering grievances and opportunism created by armed conflict lay the groundwork for conflict recurrence. Paul Collier has labeled this vicious circle “the conflict trap”. This illustrates the concept of fragility: the chronic inability of a state to absorb or manage risks such as armed conflict.

The consequences of armed conflict are widespread and long-lasting after the end of a conflict. On average, conflict decreases GDP per capita by 15%. Figure 1 shows simulated GDP per capita levels for the 1970–2000 period for a country that started out at USD 1,100 per capita (about the level of Algeria in 1970). The dotted line shows the average growth trajectory for a non-conflict developing country. The dashed line shows the same for an identical country experiencing conflict – specifically, a country that had an outbreak of war in 1974 that lasted for thirteen years (up to 1986).

Immediately following the outbreak of the conflict, shown by the first blue line, the two trends diverge. GDP falls sharply in the conflict-affected country, but continues to grow in the otherwise identical country at peace. This effect notably persists long after the conflict ended (marked by the second blue line).

Toward the end of the conflict and in the initial post-conflict years, there is evidence of recovery. But the aggregate recovery growth is on average *not sufficient* to close the gap caused by the conflict; the median conflict-affected country is almost 10% below the development trajectory it would have followed without the conflict. For some countries, the consequences of conflict are even worse, as shown by the bottom of the confidence interval on the green line in Figure 1. In rare cases, countries can experience growth miracles in the aftermath of conflict, wherein GDP growth exceeds what would have been expected without conflict. This is evident at the top of the confidence interval in Figure 1.

While the direct consequences of conflict are detrimental, the indirect consequences are even more so. For example, there is evidence of strong negative effects of conflict on the accessibility of water and adequate sanitation facilities. A lack of available safe drinking water in turn leads to high infant mortality levels and negatively impacts on

children’s health issues more generally.

Armed conflict also has political effects. It inhibits democratization and exacerbates human rights abuses. In this way, conflict exacerbates pre-existing patterns of social and economic exclusion.

Conflict induces insecurity in leaders, causing them to resort to political incarceration, brutal subjugation, and torture in order to maintain their grip on power. Combating violent conflict has led to the development of militarized police states, as seen throughout the MENA region. The *modus operandi* of the elites in these states favors the use of coercion whenever they perceive their position to be threatened.

With no viable channels for voicing opposition in these contexts, civil society responds by taking to the streets. Riots, in turn, lead to an intensified state securitization and repression. This creates a dynamic in which conflict induces the state to be more repressive; repression begets riots; and riots create an even more repressive state. This is known as the “political conflict trap”.

Figure 2 shows the probability that a country will engage in political terror against its citizens when facing different forms of civil conflict. Those states experiencing durable, recurring war are 80% more likely to engage in the worst forms of human rights abuse involving widespread torture and political incarceration (as coded on the Political Terror Scale).

When civil society is allowed to organize freely, elites can choose to embrace or oppose new ideas. In contrast, the oppression of new ideas leads to a radicalization of opposition movements. When such radicalized groups are successful in overthrowing the regime, they often also subsequently adapt a repressive approach to public debate, which in turn spawns new dissent.

A Window of Opportunity

While under peaceful conditions, the international community cannot do much about state fragility. The opposite is true when conflicts are being resolved. Post-conflict environments offer a unique opportunity for the international community to engage with and start to address the various dimensions of state fragility. This may take a while; the parties may have to endure the cost of conflict for some time before peace seems ripe. Peace agreements fundamentally involve the belligerent parties to the conflict. Both parties sign when peace is more attractive than conflict.

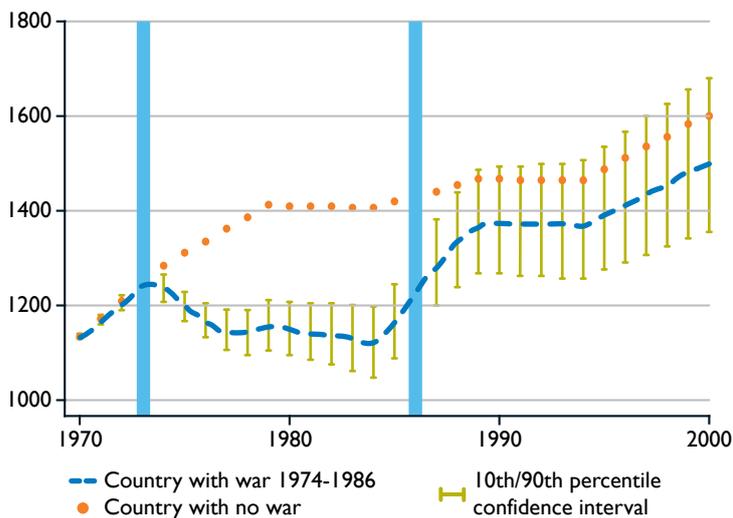


Figure 1: Economic Consequences of Conflict

Peacekeeping

A central problem plaguing all peace agreements is the *commitment problem*. Commitment problems arise when actors can never really be certain that agreements will be honored. Commitment problems, however, are also acute in fragile settings since institutions are weak and there is no way to get the actors to credibly commit to their promises. In fragile settings that lack a truly independent judiciary or security sector, commitment problems will inevitably give rise to a *security dilemma*. Actors facing a security dilemma

cannot take measures to secure themselves without this being perceived as threatening by other actors. Under the security dilemma, cooperation becomes extremely hard, and the incentive for the parties to a conflict is to prepare for future conflict and not to invest in peace or in building less fragile states.

The commitment problem is especially serious in civil wars. In the wake of conflict, demobilization and disarmament of the rebels' army tips the advantage towards the state. In many cases the state becomes increasingly exclusive and repressive, fueling resentment and grievances.

One way of addressing the commitment problem is through the deployment of peacekeepers. Peacekeeping operations (PKOs) work: they substantially decrease the risk that conflicts spread from one country to another. They also de-escalate conflict, shorten conflict duration, and increase the longevity of peace following conflict.

Researchers at PRIO and Uppsala University have conducted the first *comprehensive* assessment of the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping. The results show that previous research on peacekeeping has underestimated the beneficial results of peacekeeping operation (PKO) deployment. Figure 3 shows the simulated and observed proportion of countries in conflict under the different PKO scenarios for the period 1990 to 2013. The two solid black lines report the observed proportion of countries in conflict, with the top line showing countries in either minor or major conflict and the bottom line showing only major conflict. In 2001, about 17% of all countries in the

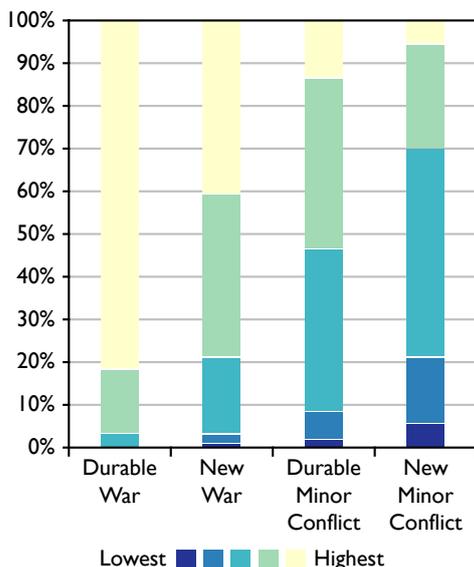


Figure 2: Political Terror as a Consequence of Armed Civil Conflict

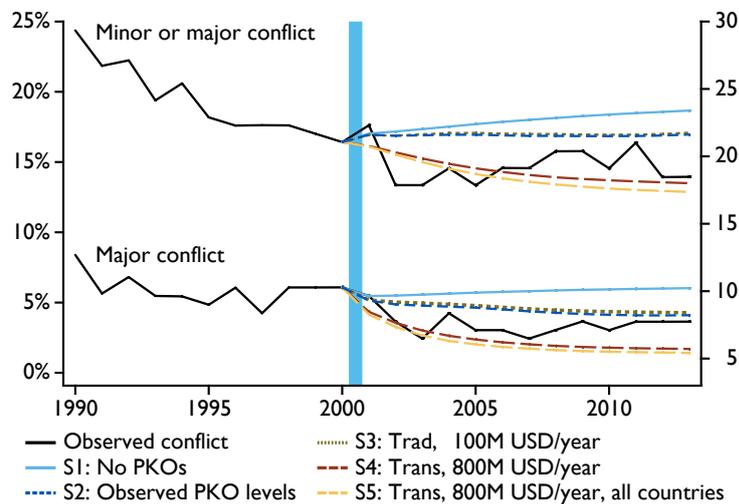


Figure 3: Global Observed and Simulated Incidence of Conflict, 1990–2013, across PKO Scenarios

world had a conflict. In 6% of these countries, there was a major conflict. In short, the simulations show that if the UN had invested USD 200 billion in PKOs with strong mandates, the incidence of major armed conflict would have been reduced by up to two-thirds relative to a scenario without PKOs. 150,000 lives could have been saved, and 10% of global GDP recouped over the 13-year period compared to a non-PKO scenario.

The more the UN is willing to spend on peacekeeping, and the stronger the mandates provided, the greater the conflict-reducing effect.

Peacekeeping operations can also contribute to civilian protection more directly within the context of fragile states experiencing armed conflict. Again, research shows that robust mandates, particularly those that are able to tackle the commitment problem, are important. Enforcement missions, i.e. those with mandates that allow peacekeepers to interfere with armed actors for the purpose of protecting civilians, are especially effective. They regulate the situations in which peacekeepers can act more forcefully, without violating the core principles of UN peacekeeping. Peacekeepers, then, do not have to be – and should not be – passive bystanders to attacks on civilians.

Developing Civil Society

Since the Second World War, more armed conflicts have ended in negotiated settlements than in military victories. But not all agreements are equal in terms of their ability to permanently end a conflict, and more peace agreements fail than succeed. What explains why some negotiated

settlements result in long-term peace while others do not? This is an important question to answer given the serious political, economic, and social consequences of conflict, particularly for fragile states.

Agreement inclusiveness is a key factor for agreement success: negotiated settlements are more likely to “stick” when non-elite groups, such as women and civil society organizations, are included in the negotiations and agreement contents. Agreements that are crafted and signed solely by elites are unlikely to fully address the wider societal tensions and local-level grievances that can simmer on long after the ink has dried on an agreement and lead to a new outbreak of violence. Elite agreements are also unlikely to build the institutional foundations for long-term peace and social cohesion, including mechanisms for democratic representation, the opening of civil society space, and a reduction in social inequalities like gender, ethnicity, and geographic region. The international community’s intervention in post-conflict settlement activities can be particularly effective in this respect when those activities contribute to strengthening non-elite actors and building their capacity to participate in peace negotiations.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 calls for women’s full participation in peace processes in order to maintain and promote peace and security. The adoption of this resolution in 2000 resulted in an increase in specific references to women in peace agreements, particularly those in which the United Nations played a mediating role. Despite this, the proportion of agreements containing references to women remains low: on average, only around 16% of agreements signed between 1990 and 2010 address gender issues. Likewise, only around 9% of negotiators in peace processes conducted during the same time period were women. But including women at the negotiating table, and women’s concerns

in agreements, is important for ensuring that their particular needs are met in post-conflict periods; ensuring that the issue of sexual violence is addressed, and helping women to achieve larger social, legal, and political gains – which benefits society at large as well.

Peace agreements are much less likely to fail when civil society organizations and women participate in peace processes. During negotiations, civil society organizations like religious groups, formal non-governmental organizations, or grassroots community groups can act as neutral arbiters and help the warring parties to overcome their differences. Similar to the involvement of women in peace processes, giving civil society organizations a voice in negotiations can help to ensure that the needs of ordinary citizens are included in an eventual agreement. In post-conflict contexts, civil society can help to spread awareness about, and popular support for, an agreement. Perhaps most importantly, a strong civil society can provide an alternative to rebel groups for individuals to voice dissent and achieve social change. Additionally, civil society organizations can also help to provide the public goods and services that incentivize people to join rebellions and break peoples’ dependence on rebel groups for these goods.

Problems with Elite Bargains

To address the problem of armed conflict in fragile societies, a common recommendation is to include the leaders of the competing factions in an institutionalized powersharing arrangement. The hope is that, *ex-ante*, the leaders of each faction will see the payoff from peaceful cooperation as superior to the expected returns from violence and that, *ex-post*, the rewards from cooperative behavior will sustain this expectation (Gates, et al. 2016). Unfortunately, more often than not, such arrangements do not sustain peace.

Elite bargains do not adequately address the commitment problem. When the conditions that

made the agreement become less attractive, the temptation to start fighting again is too great.

Focusing on the masses rather than the elites is more efficient. Elite-based arrangements generally do not constrain governments from repression that exacerbates social divisions or exploits the weaknesses of vulnerable groups. Such repression, in turn, often exacerbates grievances that raise social tension and make the targets of repression more willing recruits for insurgents.

It is therefore critical to promote institutions that most significantly constrain governments from abusing less powerful groups and individuals, thereby making ordinary citizens less willing recruits for potential insurgents, solving the commitment problem, and making conflict less likely. Institutions such as independent judiciaries and the protection of religious freedom, for example, have been shown to reduce repression and the risk for further conflict.

The Long Term

Peace in the short run is more easily built in fragile states under the auspices of peace agreements guaranteed by peacekeepers. In the long run, political reforms are also necessary to ensure durable peace. Political institutions that safeguard against government repression and limit the extent of economic and political exclusion serve to provide a more enduring peace. These institutions need to be constitutional and firmly entrenched. Other aspects of governance are also important for building peace. Enshrining these reforms in peace agreements offers a chance for the peace to last and to reduce state fragility. ■

References

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THE PROJECT

The Conflict Trends project aims to answer questions related to the causes of, consequences of and trends in conflict. The project will contribute to new conflict analyses within areas of public interest, and works to produce thorough and quality-based analysis for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which together with the World Bank funded the research presented here.

PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.