

# The Congo, Haiti and Afghanistan: Fragile states and the maintenance of violence

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***Fragile States** shows how the monopoly of violence is a crucial element in maintaining state fragility. By taking case studies from The Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti and Afghanistan, the authors intend to define and clarify the meaning behind fragile statehood and to determine why outside intervention is often very limited in its actions to halt or prevent war and conflict in these countries. **Ramona Wadi** values the book's analysis which, in addition to imparting a deep insight into the complex nature of fragile states, gives a coherent historical framework which defines political trends in today's era.*



**Fragile States: War and Conflict in the Modern World. Lothar Brock, Hans-Henrik Holm, Georg Sørensen & Michael Stohl. Polity Press. January 2012.**

## Find this book

*Fragile States: War and Conflict in the Modern World* assesses war and its implications through a detailed account of history, colonialism and institutions such as the United States, NATO and the United Nations. Based on the premise that fragile statehood and violent conflict are interdependent, the book delves into the impact caused by exploitation within fragile states and by decisions made within the international community.

The authors dispel the definition of war as a solely hostile conflict between nations. They note that since 1989, 120 out of 128 armed conflicts have been caused by *intrastate* violence. The book brings forward the characteristics of fragile states and attempts to analyse the role of foreign intervention. Ultimately, it brings to light the contrast between limited action and the further enhancement of conflict when taking sides in a civil war.



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The book portrays the monopoly of violence as a crucial element in maintaining state fragility by focussing on three states – The Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti and Afghanistan. Many factors such as religious and ethnic divides, geopolitics and colonialism, have aided in undermining state legitimacy and the conflicts are exacerbated by outside intervention. This is especially true if a state is rich in natural resources or provides a strategic geographic location. The book matches also these countries against more successful states like Botswana and Costa Rica to further understand what constitutes state failure and why some countries have avoided such a fate.

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Various political systems in pre colonial Africa failed to define territorial control, with tribes and local communities taking precedence over nations. With colonial rule, tyranny became the means through which economic sustainability, welfare, and even culture were manipulated.

The Democratic Republic of Congo suffered from the Belgian colonial legacy of exploiting Congolese

in slave labour. The colonialists failed to provide any form of government structure, resorting to violence to achieve social control. In the aftermath of colonialism, Congolese society retained violent practices over the country, resulting in the murder of Patrice Lumumba and a US aided military coup which installed Mobutu as president.

The Congo's natural resources were swiftly considered the ruler's possession – reminiscent of the colonialist era. Mobutu relied heavily on the West to control extra-territorial violence and the West fulfilled this demand due to a reciprocal dependence, this time on an anti Soviet ally. At the end of the Cold War the West retracted its support, citing democracy rhetoric.

In Haiti, US occupation failed to address political and economic problems. Following the Duvaliers' rule, military coups and political unrest, Haiti remained politically and economically fragile as well as heavily dependent on the international community. The structure of the political elite retained violence as a method of control, ushering in a conflict between emancipation and exploitation. Both culture and statehood remain weak, with social control problems stemming from an elitist predatory behaviour towards the poor.

Afghanistan's lack of central government throughout history culminated in a reinforcement of tribal identity and territorial control. After Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, militias fought for state control, resulting in a civil war between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. Despite Taliban control of many parts of Afghanistan, unity was never achieved. After the US invasion of Afghanistan following September 11, the US supported government of Hamid Karzai failed to achieve any form of control over the country. Warlords mistrusted the concept of state, fearing their leadership legitimacy would be undermined. Afghanistan became embroiled in a system where various powerful figures indulge in corruption to consolidate power – a weak state which is manifested in the strength of Afghan tribes.

From the Cold War era to post September 11 politics, the book's detailed overview of history shows how the international community's perception of fragile states has evolved from the discourse of instability within the state to that of security politics. During the Cold War and its aftermath, a series of military coups aided by the CIA were imposed on various Latin American countries, under the guise of eliminating the communist threat. In post September 11, foreign intervention has largely been manipulated by governments and media, using the nature of violence within fragile states to justify some form of intervention.

While fragile states share certain traits, such as formal sovereignty, self-serving elites and a form of external domination, recent intervention by the international community has also followed a certain path which justifies war by citing humanitarian concerns. George Bush's War on Terror was replete with references to freedom, human rights and democracy, despite military intervention in Iraq carried out under false claims of mass destruction weapons. In turn, media manipulation of events, such as the fabricated story of Iraqi babies removed from incubators and being left to die on the hospital floors served to sway public sentiment and consolidate the image of good versus evil.

The authors define how UN Security Council resolutions are also failing to provide a framework of what constitutes protection and humanitarian intervention, however the text would have benefited from a deeper insight into the consequences of foreign intervention and the responsibility to protect. While acknowledging that the international community does not deal with fragile states in a consistent manner, the humanitarian cost is not adequately expounded upon. It should be worth noting that any plundering of resources by foreign powers ultimately divests a community of independence.

An important point the book makes is in the area of trading of natural resources for weapons. With the major arms dealer countries happening to be permanent members of the UN Security Council, military intervention for humanitarian reasons degenerates further, forcing one to question the legitimacy and accountability of UN resolutions.

This book is an invaluable analysis which, in addition to imparting a deep insight into the complex nature of fragile states, gives a coherent historical framework which defines political trends in today's era. It also shows how the failure of the UN to act consistently creates further mistrust within communities living in fragile states. While the interdependence between fragile states and violence seems obvious at first glance, the book delves into each country's unique history, allowing the reader to discern different historical circumstances which ultimately led these countries to a similar fate.

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**Ramona Wadi** is a freelance writer who writes regularly for [Upside Down World](#) – an online magazine covering Latin American politics and activism. Other articles and reviews have been published in [Toward Freedom](#), [Rabble.ca](#), [Irish Left Review](#), [History Today](#) and [Green Left Weekly](#). Her research and writing focuses on the history of revolutions in Latin America, Chile, the Nueva Cancion movement, the struggles of indigenous people, political philosophy and human rights. Ramona tweets at [@walzerscent](#) and blogs at <http://walzerscent.blogspot.com>, <http://redmetaphor.blogspot.com> and <http://venceremoschile.blogspot.com>. [Read more reviews by Ramona.](#)

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