*Chapter 29*

*Religion, Development, and Fragile States*

By Seth Kaplan

In recent years, state fragility has vaulted up the list of foreign-policy concerns as the United States and other developed countries respond to threats posed by well-organized extremist groups operating in weakly governed states. As Robert Rotberg wrote in *Foreign Affairs* following the September 11 terrorist attacks, “the threat of terrorism has given the problem of failed nation-states an immediacy and importance that transcends its previous humanitarian dimension” (Rotberg 2002: 127).

Rotberg’s observation explains both the recent interest in state fragility by Western governments and why international efforts to stabilize fragile states often focus on regional or global security concerns at the expense of promoting development and state building. As development actors have long recognized, however, it is not coincidental that violence and poverty are both products of weak governance. The political instability and economic problems that typically plague fragile states create a cycle of dysfunction that holds these countries—and often their neighbors—behind. As a 2013 report from the Brookings Institution concluded, an increasing percentage of the world’s poor live in fragile states, with the share “set to rise to half in 2018 and nearly two-thirds in 2030” (Chandy, Ledlie, and Penciakova 2013).

Religion’s influence can be a blessing or a curse in such places. Sometimes it is both. Religious institutions, leaders, teachings, and groups impact the social and political environments of fragile states in myriad—and sometimes contradictory—ways. In its different manifestations, religion can be a mechanism to sow social divisions, undermine the effectiveness of government, systematically disadvantage certain groups, or catalyze extremist agendas. In Syria and across the Levant, for instance, the dynamism of religious extremists and long-standing divisions among religious groups have made prospects for peace dim. But shared religious values also can be a way to bridge differences, religious affiliation can promote social cohesion, and religious organizations can deliver much-needed public services (as occurs in many countries in Africa). As this chapter will explore, religion’s impact can be quite varied even within the same country.

Local leaders and development organizations seeking to improve the welfare of people living in fragile states need to understand the variety of roles religious actors play in these places. Yet, too often religion’s crucial influence in fragile states is not sufficiently taken into account by the development community—especially when religion’s claims clash with its own secular norms—with the result that religious leaders and teachings are underutilized when seeking to end conflict (as in Syria), religious organizations are underutilized when seeking to enhance service delivery (as in the Democratic Republic of Congo), and religious values are underutilized when seeking to change social norms around things like corruption (as in Nigeria). Religion’s impact is also underemphasized in analyses of state fragility (as in the numerous rankings of fragile states), leaving many actors unprepared for crises when they do erupt.

This chapter examines how religious elements both hamper and facilitate development in fragile states. It first introduces the concept of state fragility and how religion contributes to it. Later, it looks at how religion can help address the roots of fragility, focusing specifically on how formal religious organizations and informal religious networks can deliver services to the poor, enhance security, and promote development. Finally, the conclusion recommends avenues of further study to promote cooperation among development actors and religious leaders and organizations.

**Fragile States: Causes and Consequences**

Scholars and practitioners use terms such as “fragile states,” “failed states,” and “weak states” to describe countries unable to administer their territories effectively. While there is no set definition for these expressions, and therefore no consensus on which places qualify, most experts agree that any country where the government is unable to deliver even the most basic public services—such as territorial control and security—to a significant portion of the population is *failing*. A completely *failed* state—such as Somalia, Haiti, Liberia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) at one time or another—is one where the state has withered away in the face of violence, warlordism, or criminal activity.

The term *fragile* or *weak* encompasses those countries described above but also a much wider group of territories where the national government operates, but where institutions are so dysfunctional that they perform many of their tasks badly or not at all. Although many developing countries have flimsy institutional foundations, are plagued by corruption, are handicapped by ineffectual governing bodies, and suffer from weak rule of law, most scholars and practitioners agree that fragile states are only those where these problems have become so systemic that they threaten stability (Di John 2008). The state is so incapacitated that it cannot provide many essential services: public schools and hospitals barely operate in many places, police and judges are beholden to the rich and the powerful, and the black market trumps legitimate moneymaking activities. Depending on the degree of dysfunction, fragile states can be either close to collapse, as in Nepal, functioning at a bare minimum level, as in Nigeria, or working haphazardly, as in Guatemala and Bolivia.

In a number of cases, the governing regime operates reasonably well but is unable to impose its rule throughout its territory. In Georgia, Colombia, and Pakistan, secessionists, drug gangs, and militants limit the national government’s writ. Rebellious armies have carved out unrecognized mini-states in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Mali. In other cases, such as Uzbekistan, pre-2003 Iraq, and pre-2011 Syria, the state may seem anything but weak; however, highly repressive policies hide a combustibility that can burst into flames if the regime loses control (Kaplan 2014). In all these cases, states suffer from weak capacity, an inability to enforce its authority, and limited legitimacy (OECD 2010). Interaction with forces beyond its borders exacerbates these problems (g7+ 2011).

The lack of a standard definition means that the line separating fragile countries from conflict countries has often blurred. In recent years, the term *fragile and conflict states* (FCAS) has gained currency as a result.

There are as many lists of fragile states as there are definitions. The most widely cited is *Foreign Policy*’s annual Failed States Index (FSI), produced in conjunction with the Fund for Peace. In 2012, Somalia topped the FSI’s list of “failed or failing states,” followed by the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Sudan, and Chad (Foreign Policy and Fund for Peace 2012). Other important lists include those produced by the Center for Systemic Peace,the Political Instability Task Force (originally the State Failure Task Force), the Institute for Economics and Peace (in conjunction with the Economist Intelligence Unit), the Brookings Institution, the World Bank, and the OECD (Marshall and Cole 2011; Political Instability Task Force 2013; Institute for Economics and Peace 2013; Rice and Patrick 2008; World Bank 2013; OECD 2013)*.*

Virtually all the definitions take a functional approach, emphasizing the territorial, security, administrative, and economic aspects of statehood. The OECD, for instance, considers deficiencies in state capacity and authority as well as political will key drivers of illegitimacy and fragility (OECD 2011). Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, for instance, define “ten critical functions” that states must perform in the modern world (Ghani and Lockhart 2008). Stewart Patrick emphasizes the relative nature of a state’s strength, based on how well it provides security, effective economic management, an environment conducive to social welfare, and legitimate institutions (Stewart 2011). Most of the lists are, as the Center for Systemic Peace describes its approach, based on “multi-dimensional schemes” that yield a “matrix of effectiveness and legitimacy dimensions as a method for assessing state fragility” (Marshall and Cole 2011: 28-9). The FSI, for instance, ranks countries according to twelve social, economic, political, and military indicators.

Religion does not play a large role in any of these lists. The lists tend to be heavily weighted towards measurements of government effectiveness, economic dynamism, demographics, and violence. But to the extent that they take into account factionalization, group grievances, and discrimination, the lists do give a role to religion, albeit indirectly. For instance, of the twelve FSI indicators, five reflect to some extent pressures or measures that are related to religion. “Group grievances” (which encompasses religious discrimination and violence) and “human rights and rule of law” (which encompasses religious persecution) come closest. “Factionalized elites” (which could be the product of religious divisions); “uneven economic development” (which could highlight horizontal inequities); and “state legitimacy” (which encompasses government effectiveness and power struggles) are more indirectly related.

By not zeroing in more closely on religion (and identity-based divisions), these lists are missing or underweighting one of the most important factors determining the fragility of states. As a result, their assessments are often far off the mark, markedly reducing their capacity to predict crises even though this is one of their major aims. Pakistan deteriorated from 34th on the FSI in 2005 to 9th in 2006 (suggesting a marked increase in its fragility) when fatalities from terrorism began to rise. In 2010, just before its civil war began, Syria placed 49th on the FSI. Bahrain, which now has its own simmering religious conflict, placed 133rd. Clearly these states were not as stable as their ranking indicated.

My own research suggests that a better way to assess fragility is to examine the two most important factors determining a country’s ability to navigate difficulties: the capacity of its population to cooperate (social cohesion) and the ability of its institutions (formal and informal) to channel this cooperation to meet national challenges (Kaplan 2008: 17-45). These two factors shape how a government interacts with its citizens; how officials, politicians, military officers, and businesspeople behave; and how effective foreign efforts to upgrade governance will be. In short, they determine both a society’s capacity to overcome a shock or longstanding inadequacy that threatens its most basic institutions and its capacity to promote development over the long-term.

Fragile states are deficient in both areas. Their populations have little capacity to cooperate in pursuit of public goods. A shortage of social cohesion (based on the relationship members of a group have with one another and with the group as a whole, levels of social cohesion determine the tendency for a group to unite in working towards a goal) plays a crucial role in the states’ difficulties, something religious divisions contribute to but which religious actors may have a way to overcome. Put differently, populations in these contexts have severe ethnic, religious, clan, or ideological divisions that make cooperation among subnational (or supernational) identity groups to advance national goals problematic. When combined with weak (or dysfunctional) institutions, these structural divisions feed on each other in a vicious circle that severely undermines the legitimacy of the state, leading to political orders that are highly unstable and hard to reform. A strong national identity is crucial to the creation of state legitimacy, because a legitimate political order is usually built around a cohesive group—and it uses institutions that reflect that group’s historical evolution (Hudson 1977). A cohesive identity depends on many factors. India and Indonesia have each had sufficient common history and culture, a long enough period of colonialism, a strong enough set of common institutions, and capable leadership at critical points—all of which accustomed their peoples to an overarching social cohesion despite religious and ethnic diversity.

Countries with strong social cohesion are more stable, better governed, more development oriented, and better able to deal with crises because common challenges trigger cooperation. Where social cohesion is lacking, political infighting and weak governing bodies undermine state legitimacy. This leads to greater conflict, poorer governance, poorer development outcomes, and greater instability. Divisions can make arduous the formation of apolitical state bodies capable of distributing public services and applying the law evenly, and the absence of these bodies further sharpens divisions. As William Easterly has written, diversity only dampens economic growth in the absence of effective institutions (Easterly 2000: 12).[[1]](#footnote-2) As we’ll see below, religion has a remarkable impact on cohesion.

**How Religion Contributes to Fragility**

Religious belief and behavior play a crucial role in determining the prospects of many fragile states. However, the likelihood that faith will be used to promote or undermine stability depends significantly on the nature of the state and the context. The more effective governments are, and the less stark the social divisions, the less likely it is groups will mobilize along religious divides. As Timothy Sisk writes in *Between Terror and Tolerance*, “The interplay between religion, ethnicity, and state authority is central to an analysis of the prospects for conflict and the prospects for peace” (Sisk 2011: 229). Identity divisions play a large role in fragile states. Whereas successful countries are able to channel the affinitive power of identity and group allegiance into country development—yielding states that are more stable, faster growing, less corrupt, better governed, and more development oriented—the divided populations in fragile states possess neither a strong unifying identity nor the robust state institutions necessary to develop one. As a result, they often fall into a cycle of mistrust, zero-sum competition for power, exploitation, disorder, and stagnation, with dire consequences for economies and governance (Putnam 1993: 177).

Religion can function as a primary identity marker, but often it complements or exacerbates existing ethnic divisions and grievances (Little 2011: 9-28).[[2]](#footnote-3) As the United States Institute of Peace’s David Smock argues,

While religion is an important factor in conflict, often marking identity differences, motivating conflict, and justifying violence, religion is not usually the sole or primary cause of conflict. The reality is that religion becomes intertwined with a range of causal factors—economic, political, and social—that define, propel, and sustain conflict. (Smock 2008: 3)

In countries such as Israel/Palestine, Nigeria, Bosnia, and Sri Lanka, for instance, ethnicity was far more important in the early stages of conflict; although religious affinity became more important as time went on, it was never the primary driver of conflict. In such cases, religion can become a tool for leaders or extremists seeking to advance an exclusionary agenda. Religious identity and belief—and calls to defend one’s faith by religious leaders—mobilize fighters and populations in a way that ethnic sentiment may not. Practically speaking, however, theological or doctrinal differences are rarely the principal cause of conflict in what are very complex situations (Smock 2008: 2).

Religious conflict differs from ethnic conflict in a number of ways. Religious actors tend to draw on a deeper infrastructure and a more developed belief system than ethnic actors. They may be heavily influenced by what is happening elsewhere in the world (as in the Sunni-Shiite conflict discussed below) and have greater resources available if a conflict ignites (as the war in Syria attests). Religious identity may also make compromise harder at times (as in the Arab-Israeli conflict). Ethnic conflict, on the other hand, is much more localized—though diaspora can play a significant role (as in Northern Ireland). It may also be harder to end: there have been far more states created for the sake of ethnic nationalism than religious belief. This suggests that ethnic relationships are often more permanent than religious relationships, at least for larger populations. Smock concludes that “in many cases the lines between ethnic and religious identities have become so blurred that parsing them to assign blame for violence is difficult if not impossible” (Smock 2008: 2).

It should be noted that many conflicts that are called “religious” are actually multidimensional, with other elements playing prominent—often much more prominent—roles. As Frances Stewart has argued, horizontal inequalities between different identity groups (resulting from a combination of political, economic, and cultural marginalization) often play a significant role (Stewart 2010).

The state can either provide barriers to, or allow for, the use of religion to promote a sectarian agenda. Where the state is robust enough to act equitably and justly, ruling regimes will at least have the tools to promote political inclusion and encourage tolerance if they so desire. But the weak institutions in fragile states are especially susceptible to elite capture and favoritism. As such, they provide greater incentives for leaders to opportunistically use religion (and other identity markers) to gain, maintain, and project power. Nigeria and Sudan provide two examples of how religion became interwoven with longstanding grievances among identity groups.[[3]](#footnote-4)

In Nigeria, religion has increasingly become a factor in conflict, but it still plays a smaller role than ethnicity and the perceived unfairness of the economic and political systems. Nigeria’s late 1960s civil war was rooted in ethnic divisions, and the long-standing conflict in the Niger Delta is based on local grievances regarding the division of economic spoils coming from the exploitation of oil. Disputes over political power, land, the placing of markets, the identity of officials, and the division of the country’s enormous natural resource wealth—disputes which plague a much broader swathe of the country—occur often among migrants and indigenous populations, local populations and the central government, or two or more of the country’s 250-plus ethnic groups. Religious differences exacerbate existing tensions, such as those between the north (which is mainly Islamic) and the south (which is mainly Christian and animist). The rise of Boko Haram, the Muslim fundamentalist sect that has become the biggest threat to the country’s stability in recent years, reflects the growing salience of religion, but the roots of the insurgency can be traced to social exclusion and a lack of development that contributes to the impoverishment of the country’s northeastern region.[[4]](#footnote-5)

The decades-long war between Sudan and South Sudan (they fought between 1955 and 1972 and again between 1983 and 2005) was often described as being religious in nature, but in reality the disputes were rooted in longstanding racial, ethnic, linguistic, and geographical divisions, with religion only coming into play towards the end. Northerners (actually northerners from a relatively small part of the north) controlled the central government and received a disproportionate share of its resources, enjoying a middle-income level of wealth, while those in the south (and in most outlying areas of the state) had little infrastructure, few public services, and great poverty. Northerners wanted Arabic to be the national language, whereas people in the south preferred English. Northerners identified with the Arab world, while southerners considered themselves African. Only later on, when an Islamic fundamentalist government came to power in Khartoum and southerners allied themselves more with Christian actors outside the country did religion begin to play a major role. Meanwhile, Christians have fought Christians (from different ethnic groups) in the south over land and cattle and Muslims have fought Muslims in places such as Darfur.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Religion’s influence is starkest in regions where affiliation plays a prominent or dominant role shaping identity. Such conditions are common in the Middle East where, as Bernard Lewis notes, “religion, or more precisely membership of a religious community, is the ultimate determinant of identity … the focus of loyalty and, not less important, the source of authority” (Lewis 1998: 15 and 22). In places such as Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Northern Ireland, religion has been ethnicized, making social divisions more permanent (Little 2011: 9-28). In such places, conflict may take on the attributes of both ethnic and religious conflict and prove very hard to end.

Syria’s demographic mosaic has always made it highly vulnerable to conflict, especially given the artificial nature of the existing state (which was established by European colonists less than a century ago). Two of the country’s three sharpest divisions are rooted in religion: that between Alawites (a sect of Shiite Islam with syncretistic elements) and Sunnis and between highly pious and secular Sunnis. (The third sharp division is between the Kurds and everyone else). While religion has always played a role in the jockeying for power among the country’s many groups, the civil war has accentuated its importance, turning the conflict into something akin to a religious war.[[6]](#footnote-7) Shiite Iran and Hezbollah support the Alawite (which they consider an allied faith) government against the Sunni insurgents (which consider it heretical) backed by Sunni regimes in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. The country’s eleven Christian sects (which make up roughly one-tenth of the population) are likely, as has been the case elsewhere in the region, to be the one of the biggest losers from the increasing importance of religion in political life. These groups have no state of their own and no significant backer within the international community (the West has long since ceased to support their co-religionists in the region).

Neighboring Lebanon is similarly divided into confessional groups that jockey for power, with Sunnis, Shiites, and various Christian groups playing major political roles. The constitution attempts to mediate among these by dividing up power among them. Seats in parliament are reserved for eleven different confessional groups, with Christians and Muslims receiving half each in total. Positions in the government bureaucracy are allocated on a similar basis. The top three public offices are distributed to a Maronite Christian (the president), a Shi'a Muslim (the speaker of the parliament), and a Sunni Muslim (prime minister), with smaller sects receiving smaller positions. But despite such complicated efforts at maintaining stability, peace has always been fragile in the country; it suffered from a 15-year civil war and is highly vulnerable to spillover from Syria’s conflict.

Although the Sunni-Shiite divide has its modern roots in an ethnic nationalist geopolitical conflict between Iranians and Arabs and was not driven by theological precepts or religious doctrine, but rather by political power calculations, this may be changing. Religious identity and belief is increasingly a vehicle for choosing sides in conflict, mobilizing support, formation of organizations, distribution of patronage, and forging political and geopolitical alliances. Even though the rise of religion as a force across the Middle East and wider Islamic world can be traced back at least to 1979 (with the antecedents slowly building since the 1960s) when religious groups claimed power in Tehran and religious extremists seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca (the holiest site in Islam), the Iraq War starting in 2003 and the forces unleashed by the Arab Awakening starting in 2011 have certainly brought religious divisions to the fore. The power vacuum that typically accompanies the collapse of authority in fragile states has made groups based on subnational (or supranational) identities the only safe refuge when the state is unable to ensure security. Conflict between Sunni and Shi’a groups now stretches from the Arabian Peninsula through Iraq and Syria and into Lebanon. Beyond the Middle East, extremist groups regularly target Shiites for attack in majority Sunni Pakistan.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Where religion is a source of conflict, it is important to distinguish between religious nationalists and religious fundamentalists (Brahm 2005). Whereas the former are closely tied to a political identity or political unit (such as when Buddhists take a nationalist position supporting the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka’s conflict), the latter are primarily driven by displeasure with modernity and often see people from their own faith as posing as much of a threat as those from other faiths. While many fundamentalists are willing to work peaceably towards their goals (such as the Salafis in Egypt, who have done surprisingly well at the country’s post-Mubarak polls), the most notorious (such as al-Qaeda) have made terrorism a prime instrument. Such groups play highly destabilizing roles in fragile states because governments in such places lack the capacity to effectively deal with the threats they pose. They can hold back development by preventing the delivery of healthcare services (such as polio vaccines), education of women, and use of technologies such as the internet. In Pakistan, Somalia, and Nigeria, these fundamentalist groups undermine weak governments and prevent millions from receiving basic public services. For more on these issues, see chapter 28.

In all these cases, religion is most destructive when leaders are able to use religious affinity or beliefs to cloak or even encourage behavior that would normally be considered unlawful and immoral. In Rwanda, to give an especially stark example, some Catholic and Protestant churches encouraged the genocide by giving moral sanction to the killing. They had laid the groundwork through years of actively practicing ethnic discrimination and teaching obedience to government authority (Longman 1997 and Longman 2011).

**How Religion Reduces Fragility**

Religion’s ability to build social cohesion and social capital—both of which do not play prominent roles in most development programming[[8]](#footnote-9)—give it great potential to fill unmet needs in fragile states. Religion can reduce fragility in two ways. First, religious leaders can work to strengthen the bonds and common identity that tie people together (e.g., by appealing to common beliefs across faiths), reducing the possibility that social differences will lead to stark divisions or conflict. Second, religious individuals and organizations can play important roles in conflict resolution, peacemaking, and the enhancement of how government works.

Just as the sociopolitical context determines how divisive religion can be, it also determines how constructive a role it can play. Where a population shares a common faith, for instance, religious leaders and organizations can leverage the resulting social cohesion to resolve conflict. On the other hand, where religion has contributed to conflict, social and political conditions may make initiatives by these same actors much more difficult—though not less essential. After all, few religious leaders are going to challenge their confessional communities in the midst of a brutal sectarian war in which religion features prominently, such as the one in Syria.

Religious actors can promote stability or exacerbate fragility, depending on how their faith is understood and employed. Both violence-legitimating extremists and violence-renouncing peacemakers draw upon the same sources. As Scott Appleby writes,

Tradition, in its fullness, encompasses the range of interpretations that have accumulated over time and achieved authoritative status because its supporters have probed, clarified, and developed the insights and teachings contained in their primary texts. To be traditional, then, is to take seriously not only the foundational sources of the religion, but also the various authoritative interpretations of these sources. (Appleby 2012: 249)

Religious leaders and organizations can reduce social fractures by appealing to religious tenets to frame political discourse in ways that promote respect, coexistence, compromise, forgiveness, and inclusiveness. They can also actively work to promote a stronger national identity (opposing parochial calls for putting one faith group above the needs of the state), build bridges with those from other religious groups, and develop institutions that work to promote a common agenda. In conflict zones, religious actors from outside may understand the issues better than a secular actor (Cox and Philpott 2012: 260) and may have a better chance at brokering a peace than anyone identified with one of the sides. Strong ties across social divides and a reputation for equitable and fair conduct are key in such places, but they take years if not decades to build up. In Mozambique, the Philippines, Guatemala, and Algeria, for instance, religious leaders have played a crucial role in brokering peace in conflict zones. In South Africa and Northern Ireland, they helped build and sustain processes to advance reconciliation in divided societies (Appleby, et al. 2010).

According to Douglas Johnston, religious leaders and organizations can be very well placed to play critical roles in fragile states because of their high levels of credibility and trust; moral warrants to better society; leverage for advancing reconciliation between groups; ability to mobilize their communities; and a sense of calling that can inspire them to overcome obstacles that would deter others (Johnston n.d.: 3). To be sure, this depends on the context and role of religion in these places. In the case of individuals, David Little concludes that practitioners of religious peacemaking

have unique stature because of their religious identities ... this gives them stature in the community and credibility to lead. It also gives them the standing to draw on religious resources in a call to forgive and to recognize the humanity of the “other.” (Little 2007: 4-6)

At the very highest levels political and development actors are now explicitly making statements about the constructive role that religious actors can play in bringing conflict to an end. In a somewhat broad—yet rhetorically powerful—statement UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan concluded in his 2002 report on the prevention of armed conflict that “religious organizations can play a role in preventing armed conflict because of the moral authority that they carry in many communities” (Little 2007: 4).

There are notable recent examples of how religious leaders and organizations can help resolve conflict. In South Africa, for instance, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu battled Apartheid and then worked toward reconciliation between whites and blacks in South Africa after it was ended. As head of the country’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he led efforts to heal the wounds from conflict through a process of restorative justice and truth seeking. The resulting social and political stability has been so widely admired that countries such as Sierra Leone, Guatemala, and Liberia have instituted similar commissions (Amnesty International n.d.).

In Nigeria, many interfaith religious organizations have worked to bring Muslims and Christians together, reduce violence, improve public services, and strengthen weak social bonds. Among these, two stand out. The Interfaith Mediation Centre, led by Reverend James Wuye and Imam Mohammed Ashafa, has trained young religious leaders in conflict resolution, sponsored a summit of religious leaders to combat violence during the 2007 election, and worked to reduce violence in places such as Kaduna and Plateau states (Interfaith Mediation Centre n.d.). The Nigerian Inter-Faith Action Association, co-chaired by the Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammadu Sa’ad Abubakar, president of the Nigerian Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs, and Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, president of the Christian Association of Nigeria, has brought together Christian and Muslim leaders and communities to work together to combat poverty and disease (Center for Interfaith Action 2011). Prominent Muslim leaders, such as the Sultan of Sokoto, will have to make every effort to counter the extremist message of the religious fundamentalist group Boko Haram and to prevent those harboring deep grievances against the state from supporting the group if it is to be defeated (Zenn 2013).

In Sierra Leone, the Inter-Religious Council emerged as the most effective bridge builder between warring factions during the country’s years of violence, partly because religion was never a driving factor in the conflict. Despite their spiritual differences, war brought Muslims and Christians closer together as they realized how much they needed each other to confront the country’s challenges. Religious leaders preached against the barbaric nature of the violence and used their influence to work towards a peaceful resolution (Turay 2000: 50-53; Appleby 2000: 153-54).

The Community of Sant'Egidio, a Catholic lay association, played a prominent role facilitating the end of the 16-year war in Mozambique (which took over one million lives) because it had strong personal ties with the warring parties and special insight into their way of thinking. The organization’s long experience working as a social service provider in the country and deep network of friendships gave it the credibility and relationships to act as mediator, influence the attitudes and actions of political leaders, and shape and monitor negotiations (Appleby 2012: 247; Cox and Philpott 2012: 257). It has worked on peace initiatives in Algeria, the Balkans, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and other areas, in the belief that war is the “mother of every poverty.”[[9]](#footnote-10)

**Religious Organizations and Networks: Catalysts for Development**

As the preceding examples illustrate, religious actors have a remarkable role to play in resolving conflict and strengthening social cohesion in fragile states. The international development community can engage a variety of faith groups in pursuing development in such contexts. These groups include formal religious organizations (including institutions such as faith-based non-governmental organizations, schools, self-help associations, and places of worship) and informal faith networks (which are generally groupings of people with similar beliefs or backgrounds).

Religious groups of all kinds are often as strong as government is weak in fragile states: they shape values and develop skills; they are the primary means of association and of conflict management; and they offer a way to build social capital and to hold community leaders more accountable. As Gerrie ter Haar and Stephen Ellis explain:

In many of Africa’s poorest countries, effective, centralized bureaucracies hardly exist. … In countries of this type, power is, literally, dis-integrated. It becomes a matter of necessity rather than choice to consider how development could be enhanced by using the resources in society at large. Many of the communities or social networks that carry the burden of development have a religious form or convey religious ideas in some sense. (ter Haar and Ellis 2006: 362)

In the Middle East, the region with the second highest proportion of states that are fragile after Africa, Islamic organizations have in many cases—and certainly in all the poorest communities—such legitimacy and constituency that it would be hard to effect substantial change without their participation. Indeed, various studies and symposia have concluded that there is enormous potential “in more purposeful efforts to associate development issues, practices, and organizations with Muslim traditions and actors” (Berkley Center and the Center for International and Regional Studies 2007).

Whereas the government may barely exist outside a few main cities in some fragile states, closely-knit religious groups (and traditional social groupings that have a strong religious component) often are deeply enmeshed in communities across a country, providing the most reliable form of security, justice, and support, especially for the poor. The more cohesive groups, such as the Mouride brotherhood (a large Islamic Sufi order found in parts of West Africa) and the Sikhs in India, have been able to leverage their spiritual networks to foster entrepreneurship, trade, and wealth creation in ways their host states cannot.

Religious organizations are often the only locally based groups working among the destitute, filling in for the state where it is too feeble to provide even basic schooling and health care. From the Congo to Pakistan, these more formal groups have a tangible and profound impact on the everyday activities of people underserved by their governments. They are essential providers of education, health, humanitarian relief, and microfinance to hundreds of millions of people. They range from large Western-based, faith-based development organizations such as Catholic Relief Services, World Vision, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and Islamic Relief to the much smaller locally based organizations typically centered on places of worship or on madrasas, seminaries, and other religious schools. Local religious organizations account for the bulk of organized group activity in many places, provide the primary means of relief for families in crises, and they even play major roles in economic endeavors. The World Bank’s 2000 *Voices of the Poor* study confirmed that “in ratings of effectiveness in both urban and rural settings, religious organizations feature more prominently than any single type of state institution” (Narayan, et al. 2000: 222).

The contribution of these groups is especially palpable in the education and health sectors. They deliver, for example, significant portions of all such services in many sub-Saharan African countries, according to the World Bank (Wolfensohn 2004). In some places, such as parts of the DRC and Pakistan, churches and mosques have effectively replaced the state as the primary supplier of public goods. One study concluded that “the only significant reductions in HIV prevalence that have been recorded [in Uganda] are in contexts where the faith community took on a leadership role” (Berkley Center 2007: 20).

Religious organizations also attract and develop human capital. Given the loss of confidence in formal government institutions and the dearth of professional opportunities available in stagnant, unstable environments, many talented local people see religious organizations as one of the best outlets for their ambitions and energies, producing a noticeable shift of entrepreneurial skills from politics and business to religious entities. Groups such as Sri Lanka’s Buddhist Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement (Sarvodaya), Turkey’s Muslim Gülen movement, and Latin America’s Jesuit-based Fe y Alegría all have used their reputation to attract highly capable people to creatively contribute to their societies.[[10]](#footnote-11) Africa is full of burgeoning churches that provide a platform for people to improve their lives in a way no other institution can. Congregants gain access to a broad range of services and support groups while learning leadership skills. The most dynamic people in the least developed places often head up a church, mosque, or temple.

**Working with Religious Organizations and Networks**

Faith often plays such an outsized role in the lives of people in fragile states that taking advantage of religion’s values, organizations, and capacities to transform behavior and promote cooperation is one of the few ways to change the dynamics of development in fractured, dysfunctional countries. There are several avenues for international development organizations to partner with religious actors and groups as they serve populations in fragile states. These include developing management capacity, enhancing the ability to deliver services, expanding education, and leveraging networks’ influence.

International mediators could help local religious leaders reach across social divides to work with organizations that represent other religious or ethnic groups, increasing the potential for conflict resolution. Similarly, training local spiritual and administrative leaders—everyone from ministers and imams to school principals and the heads of waqf foundations—on conflict resolution, management, economics, education, and social welfare would help their organizations take on larger projects, expand their services, and improve their operations. Measures that enhance the management of religious organizations would have a multiplier effect, as the better such institutions function the more likely they will be able to expand their services.

Development actors can assist religious organizations in expanding programs that deliver needed services to local communities. Assisting well-established institutions in introducing (in partnership, perhaps, with NGOs or private companies) savings and loans schemes, sanitation and garbage-collection systems, and housing development cooperatives could speed the spread of such programs throughout the developing world. Leveraging informal faith networks to promote services such as microlending and trade facilitation—services that require strong group-based social ties to ensure compliance with commitments—could open new opportunities for members of the networks to advance themselves.

Greater financial and material aid from the international community could enable mosques, churches, and temples to expand the numbers of poor children who benefit from the schooling they provide. The consequent boost in levels of literacy could, in turn, enable the poor to participate more fully in social, political, and economic life; give developing economies a better chance of meeting the challenges of globalization; and improve many other development indicators. An expansion of faith-based education might result in mixed outcomes in parts of the Muslim world, where local madrasas play a key role in delivering education but have been accused of spreading political fundamentalism. Since 9/11, many international development actors and local groups have encouraged madrasas to renounce extremism and introduce new subjects, including secular subjects, into their curricula. For instance, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD), based in Washington, D.C., has trained leaders of Pakistani madrasas in “critical thinking skills, religious tolerance, and human rights” while reminding them of their religion’s pioneering breakthroughs in the arts and sciences (Johnston 2009). Such efforts could usefully be expanded.

Finally, both religious organizations and informal religious networks offer opportunities to enhance government accountability and performance—but these opportunities usually depend on religious leaders to take the initiative. A partnership of the major religious organizations within a city or region could constitute a powerful lobby for bottom-up reform of state institutions and for greater accountability of officials. Such a partnership could gradually be extended to encompass other stakeholders with similar interests in government reform (such as companies, tribal chiefs, and non-religious NGOs). Informal social networks shape values and behaviors—and could be used to persuade bureaucrats and businessmen to eschew corruption (by, for instance, making such changes in behavior a prominent part of sermons).

To be sure, religious groups can cause problems. In addition to inspiring violence and acting as an effective recruiting sergeant for terrorism (as discussed above), religious groups can also foster social exclusion in some contexts, and thereby contribute to poverty, disempowerment, and conflict. In some contexts, religious actors can discriminate against women and undermine attempts to improve human rights.[[11]](#footnote-12) (In fact, local concepts of human rights may differ widely from international norms.) Proselytism (actual or perceived) in plural settings can foster mistrust and foment conflict, as has happened in places as diverse as Pakistan, Russia, and Nigeria (Dwarswaard 2010).

Any undertaking that engages religion in fragile states, and beyond, needs to be careful on a number of fronts. In particular, any activity that smacks of favoring one faith or denomination over another risks exacerbating, rather than healing, divisions. Outside assistance needs to be distributed in an evenhanded fashion, so that no religious community feels itself excluded from international largesse. The provision of assistance must also be handled very carefully when dealing with any organization that proselytizes, especially in a sectarian environment. The goal should be to ensure that aid is not used in any way to promote a specific religious or political viewpoint, and that where it is used to fund the delivery of services, those services are available without discrimination to everyone in a given area.

While care should also be taken to ensure that any monies distributed to local organizations do not end up with terrorists, in places such as Lebanon, Gaza, and Pakistan, organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas provide citizens with many of their most important public services in the absence of capable public authority. In Syria, millions of people may end up living in regions controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate. Such situations are enormously complex and naturally produce moral dilemmas that are hard for any aid organization to tackle. A tradeoff between alleviating hardship and avoiding helping violent actors may not be avoidable.[[12]](#footnote-13) In Somalia, Al-Shabaab, a terrorist organization, exploited the 2011 famine to collect “tax payments” from aid organizations seeking to help the millions suffering in the region they controlled (Tran 2013).

In order to take advantage of the human resources embedded in religious networks, Western development organizations, donors, multilateral organizations, and NGOs must seek a closer—and more evenhanded—partnership with local communities and the faith groups that play such prominent roles within those communities. This will require major changes in how these organizations operate. Besides reconsidering how development actually occurs—and how this might affect their programs—they will also have to reevaluate “the secular gospel underpinning the development enterprise” (Clarke 2005: 3) and begin “taking seriously people’s world-views and considering their potential for the development process as a whole” (ter Haar and Ellis 2006: 353). Western organizations that treat religion and development as separate and even incompatible fields not only undermine their program effectiveness but also risk offending and alienating the people of the communities they wish to serve (Deneulin and Bano 2009). This danger is especially acute in non-Christian environments, where local populations tend to equate “Western” with “Christian” and thus will regard any criticism of their religion (or indifference toward it) as a Christian slur.

International development organizations could be more effective dealing with the wide range of religious institutions and actors in fragile states if they stop emphasizing the amount of aid they disburse and focus instead on ensuring that financing complements and reinforces local capacities and institutions. Too often, they end up undermining or warping local arrangements by making local organizations dependent on foreign largess. While such organizations may gain prestige from the size of their budgets, community building based on a large number of small organizations—and most of the religious organizations that serve the poor are small—requires a delicate approach consisting of modest, carefully targeted investments that reinforce capacities without undermining internal coherence and accountability. Understanding the special needs of—and crafting the right strategy to partner with—the large number of small organizations in underdeveloped areas may even require the creation of a new, intermediary organization to work at “arm’s length” to bridge the gulf between large donors and multinational NGOs and the many small grassroots entities that need support.[[13]](#footnote-14)

**Conclusion: Conditions for Cooperation**

Many scholars and practitioners have pointed out the conditions under which international engagement with religious actors in fragile states can go wrong, but little thought has been done figuring out the conditions under which engagement with religious actors actually goes right. The field needs:

* A more careful empirical assessment and comparison of the types of approaches, programs, and projects through which external actors have sought to address conflict-inducing religious divisions through aid-funded projects
* A better catalogue of lessons learned on the extent to which cooperative relationships between religious communities and governments may facilitate peace and development (lessen fragility)
* A better catalogue of the extent and quality of services offered by religious organizations in fragile states
* A more careful empirical assessment and comparison of informal faith-based social networks and how they can be utilized to promote development and improve governance in states with weak institutions
* A better understanding of how religious organizations work together and/or compete and how these dynamics affect fragility and development
* A more careful empirical assessment and comparison of the types of approaches, programs, and projects with which secular donors and diplomats can successfully engage with religious organizations

Religions comprise a vast and complex body of ideas, rituals, values, and wisdom accumulated over centuries. Their rich traditions have much to contribute to today’s challenges. International development actors seeking to engage religion’s potential in fragile states should foster a curiosity about local contexts and seek out opportunities for cooperation with people of faith.

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1. “Ethnic diversity has a more adverse effect on economic policy and growth when institutions are poor. To put it another way, poor institutions have an even more adverse effect on growth and policy when ethnic diversity is high. Conversely, in countries with sufficiently good institutions, ethnic diversity does not lower growth or worsen economic policies” (Easterly 2000: 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. For further understanding of the drivers of conflict, look at the larger “need, greed, creed” debate. See, for instance, Arnson and Zartman (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See, for instance, Barnard (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See, for instance, Johnson (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. For a good overview of the causes of conflict in Sudan, see de Waal (2007). For an overview of the identity issues, see Deng (1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. See, for instance, Barnard and Saad (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. For more on the sectarian dimensions of the conflict, see Nasr (2006), Abdo (2013), and Wehrey (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. These have gained credence at the international policy level but this attention has rarely translated into action at the programming level. See, for instance, Marc, et al. (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. This quote is a maxim of the organization. See <http://www.santegidio.org/en/pace/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. See websites for Sarvodaya, <http://www.sarvodaya.org>; Fethullah Gulën, <http://en.fgulen.com>; and Fe y Alegria, http://www.feyalegria.org/en. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. There are examples of this worldwide. See, for example, DeLong-Bas (2010) and Human Rights Watch (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. For a more in-depth analysis of this area, see Flannigan (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. I discuss this concept in more detail in Kaplan (2010). David Booth has suggested something similar to overcome the problems aid agencies have had trying to nurture governance reform. See Booth (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)