Countering Centrifugal Forces in Fragile States

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International efforts to build strong states in places which lack them have repeatedly failed. Although some have taken failures in places such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia as reason for retrenchment, the violent movements that have sprung from the porous borders of the fragile world have illustrated that ignoring fragile states comes with a tremendous cost.

Although building stronger states is extremely hard, these failures are not just inevitable products of attempts to tackle intractable problems. Rather, they stem from an inability to understand the idiosyncratic nature of fragile states. The fragile state has long been a blurry concept and that blurriness has made targeted policy difficult.

Bringing the concept into focus requires a new approach rooted in the societal and institutional dynamics that cause fragility rather than the formal institutions or visible symptoms that result from it. Fragility is a function of two variables—social cohesion and institutionalization—that together determine the capacity of a population to cooperate and to direct this cooperation toward national-level challenges.

In this article, I offer a new Country Fragility Assessment Framework (CFAF) to better diagnose fragility, as well as a set of policy recommendations to address state fragility in its various shades. Departing from the traditional focus on formal institutions unveils a very different mix of policy recommendations from the usual fare.
Misdiagnosing Fragility

Past attempts to improve stability and governance in fragile states have failed because they misdiagnose what causes these countries’ problems. Fragility is believed to result from a weak state and state–society relationship. Governments are thought to lack legitimacy because of how they are chosen. They are thought to be unable to provide quality public goods because of a lack of either capacity or will. As the conventional wisdom goes, fixing what ails the state–society relationship is largely a matter of holding regular elections and increasing the ability of government to execute core functions such as education, healthcare, and providing security.3

This overly narrow perspective is often complemented by confusing the causes and effects of fragility. The widely cited lists of fragile states4 comprise measures that have no causal relationship with fragility (such as population growth and income levels); are products, rather than causes, of fragility (such as violence and corruption levels); or are based on Western political norms (such as regime type). Measuring outcomes rather than processes, existing indices conflate resilience (or luck) with true robustness, automatically characterizing as non-fragile those states that have exhibited stability, even if that stability belies significant weakness. These lists have repeatedly performed poorly in predicting conflict or state failure; many of the Arab countries now in turmoil (e.g., Libya, Bahrain) did not make these lists before 2011.5 Although any tool will inevitably have limits to its predictive power, a framework that more correctly identifies precipitants rather than products of crisis will be far likelier to yield a practicable policy toolbox capable of bolstering inclusion, prosperity, and security before it is too late.

Assessments of state fragility suffer from two main shortcomings: First, they focus much more on symptoms than on causes. While easily observable and broadly comparable symptoms of fragility facilitate cross-national comparisons, they offer little traction for understanding and bolstering individual states. Second, the concept of fragility is often entangled in common Western suppositions of how states should work. Discussion inevitably focuses on the importance of the social contract, democracy, and human rights. These are important principles, but there is little evidence that elections and commitments to international treaties will yield more stable, inclusive states. A minimum level of cohesion and institutionalization is required for a democratic social contract to be possible.6
This conceptual blurriness has had serious consequences. Clouded by the common understanding of statebuilding, international efforts to bolster the state in places such as Somalia and Afghanistan have repeatedly failed. In Somalia, international actors have repeatedly misread the country’s political dynamics and forced upon it what Somalia expert Ken Menkhaus has called “unimaginative, non-strategic, template-driven policy responses with little relevance to the Somali context and little input from Somali voices.” In Afghanistan, the construction of an overly centralized state and powerful presidency has ensured that government is too distant and corrupt to serve people’s needs and that elections make the country’s ethnic fault lines quake.

In recent years, there has been pressure for a sea change. Frustrations over international strategies led to the formation of the “g7+,” a group of fragile states formed in 2010 to share experiences and engage with donors. The group, which has expanded to include 20 countries, seeks to broaden the agenda pursued by the international community in order to better address what it sees as the root causes of fragility, in a sense addressing the second shortcoming of past efforts to rectify fragility. In 2011, this group led the development of a New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, which focuses on creating regular assessments of state fragility, establishing a comprehensive plan to reduce fragility, strengthening domestic capacity to govern, and concentrating resources on a set of five goals—referred to as the Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals (PSGs).

The New Deal—prioritizing issues that are much more likely to reduce fragility and putting assessments center stage—constitutes a promising beginning, especially compared to past stabs at fragility. However, there are clear limits to the New Deal and the efforts behind it. The PSGs do not focus on causes, just results; ignore many important drivers of fragility; and provide a very limited roadmap. There is no attempt to identify and build upon countries’ strengths. Fragile-state governments are supposed to conduct the assessments meant to guide policymaking, but political and capacity constraints will naturally impede them. The New Deal is a step, but much work remains to better understand fragility and build policies that effectively address it.

The Underlying—and Oft-ignored—Society

Fragile states are not like other states. With weak institutions and unbridgeable social divisions, they function according to a different set of sociopolitical dynamics than robust states do. As such, they face uniquely formidable obstacles to stability, development, and democracy—they are trapped in a vicious cycle whereby instability and underdevelopment feed on each other. Social divisions hamper efforts at improving governance and fostering economic opportunity,
which in turn creates discontent and a zero-sum competition for power and resources.

The way individuals, groups, and institutions interact and relate to one another determines whether a country is structurally fragile or not. Although the state is important, its function is largely a product of how groups in society relate to one another—and to it. State capacity matters, but the functioning of the state is strongly influenced by the dynamics of the society in which it is embedded.

Social cohesion—defined as the quality of relationships between groups—determines levels of trust and collaboration, and how institutions interact with one another. The more cohesive the society, the greater the likelihood that different groups and institutions will work together and manage conflict constructively. Even if consensus is ever elusive, the great majority understands the importance of working together according to a commonly accepted set of rules and values.

Social cohesion is especially important in less developed countries where formal institutions are weak and often susceptible to manipulation, corruption, and bias. Unlike more developed states, these states feature formal institutions incapable of neutral mediation or enforcement of rules and are unable to deliver truly public goods. As a result, elites and officials have much undue discretion to bend the rules and appropriate the resources of the state.

When formal institutions are weak, social cohesion can substitute to a certain extent. Moreover, without social cohesion (or a common political identity), it is very hard to improve formal institutions—the approach typically advocated by donors—because elites and officials have strong incentives to undermine reform, which may threaten their interests. On the other hand, if somehow a state is strongly institutionalized, these social fractures matter much less because government will be much more likely to act with neutrality, and thus be much fairer in adjudication and resource distribution.

Seen this way, fragility can be understood as existing along two dimensions (see Table 1), with cohesive, highly institutionalized states occupying one corner, and socially fractious and poorly institutionalized states occupying the opposite one. Different combinations of fragility exist between these extremes. Dynamic states (category I) are genuinely robust. Only this group is capable of fully tackling the challenges of development. Stable but sluggish states (category II) have potentially bright futures if they can foster good investment climates and improve state capabilities. Fragile but controlled states (category III) are inherently weak and potentially unstable. Countries that combine low-capability governments (especially low coercive powers) with highly fragmented political cultures (category IV) are fundamentally weak and unstable. Fragile states are concentrated in categories III and IV.

These underlying dynamics affect how economies, security apparatuses, administrative organs, and legal systems perform. The more cohesive the country, the
more likely these will work as advertised, inclusively and without bias. Institutions may still be less than perfect at times, but they will be much more constructive catalysts for cooperation, the resolution of disputes, security-sector reform, industrialization, and democratization. In fragile states, in contrast, institutions will be susceptible to capture or corruption. It is virtually impossible to construct sturdy formal institutions in a place like Afghanistan or Somalia without addressing the social cleavages that threaten to rip them apart.

### A New Framework

Focused on symptoms, current indices of fragility fail to capture the societal processes that characterize fragile states, be they currently stable or not. The Country Fragility Assessment Framework (CFAF) aims to fill this gap. Based on over ten years of research on fragile states, it uniquely focuses on the forces that can drive a society together or apart. It does this by systematically analyzing societal and institutional sources of fragility (see Tables 2, 3, and 4). This framework offers a guide for analyzing the context-specific challenges facing individual fragile states. The tool can also be used to roughly gauge a country’s degree of fragility in order to make cross-national and inter-temporal comparisons, though the highly qualitative nature of the metrics may limit the precision of such measurements. Even though the framework does not directly offer solutions, it does provide a clearer picture of the types of fragility affecting a

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Low Political–Identity Fragmentation</th>
<th>High Political–Identity Fragmentation</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>High Institutionalization (or at least high coercive capacity)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>I: Dynamic</td>
<td>III: Fragile but Controlled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>Syria (before 2011)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>Soviet Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>Iraq (before 2003)</td>
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<td>China</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Low Institutionalization</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>II: Stable but Sluggish</td>
<td>IV: Fragile and Unstable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senegal</td>
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<td>Armenia</td>
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<td>Tanzania</td>
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<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Libya (after 2011)</td>
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<td>Syria (after 2011)</td>
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given state, and thus points to more targeted policies that can be tailored to different contexts.

The CFAF gauges the forces working on the various groups and institutions that exist within these unconsolidated countries. Many of the issues it examines are structural in nature, making them hard though not impossible to change in the short term. Others are more amenable in the medium term. There are twelve components in all. Although all are a product of both dimensions of fragility discussed above, five are largely influenced by societal factors and five are largely influenced by institutional factors; the other two are a more balanced combination of both.

### Predominantly Influenced by Societal Sources

**Political Dynamics** covers how groups mobilize and what narrative drives their actions. When political organization and rhetoric become rooted in ethnic, religious, regional, or social identity divisions, a country is far more likely to be
Table 3: Sources of Fragility: Institutional

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>EXAMPLES OF ANALYSIS</th>
<th>POSSIBLE TOOLS</th>
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| Effectiveness and Interaction of Institutions | • How well do institutions (state and non-state) deliver public goods?  
• Can public and civil society institutions bring people together across cleavages? | • Establish commitment mechanisms to hold leaders accountable for their promises to others  
• Initiate a series of programs to improve the interface and interaction between different institutions |
| Equity of Institutions          | • Do state institutions act impersonally, equitably, and inclusively?  
• Do different types of people or regions receive different treatment or level of public service from the state? | • Expand citizenship to ensure it encompasses everyone in the country  
• Strengthen the autonomy of institutions particularly susceptible to capture |
| Perceptions of Justice          | • How do elites and groups feel they are being treated by the state? How effective are institutions at managing conflict between them?  
• What does justice mean to each group? Can they achieve it? | • Ensure that all important state institutions have balanced leadership and employment  
• Ensure that each group's sense of justice is taken into account |
| Security                        | • Weapons/violence: How do they affect political competition?  
• Does the state security apparatus favor any side? | • Ensure all political leaders enjoy equal protection  
• Provide incentives for military to stay out of politics |
| Accountability Mechanisms       | • How dependent is the state on taxes from the population and business?  
• How capable are institutions (including political parties, NGOs, courts, etc.) and processes (e.g., elections) of holding leaders accountable? Do they tend to divide or unite populations? | • Broaden income and property tax base  
• Build up the institutional capacity and cross-group representation of political parties, NGOs, etc. |

Table 4: Sources of Fragility: Both Elements

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<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>EXAMPLES OF ANALYSIS</th>
<th>POSSIBLE TOOLS</th>
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| Breadth of Economic Activity    | • Does one group dominate economic activity?  
• How diversified and broad is a country's productive economic activity? | • Take steps to make it easier for companies with no special connections to elites or no membership in any particular ethnic or religious background to operate.  
• Introduce positive discrimination policies to offer minorities, women, etc. growing share of economic pie. |
| Behavior of Leaders             | • Do national leaders act inclusively or exclusively?  
• Do leaders of political parties and other major political organizations depend on broad or narrow support? | • Provide incentives for leaders to act more inclusively  
• Change institutional and electoral design to promote collaboration across groups |
fragile (e.g., Iraq) than if political competition is conducted across such groups with leaders vying for the same audience (e.g., Indonesia). This factor lies at the heart of fragility, as it strongly influences other factors and is strongly influenced by them in turn.

**Political dynamics** lie at the heart of fragility—strongly influencing, and influenced by, other factors.

**Historical** covers how the past influences the actions of today’s leaders and groups. Rigid sub-national identities, difficult population geographies (for example, different ethnic groups concentrated in different parts of the country), and traumatic memories of conflict are all hard to change, especially in the short term. Any lingering resentment, trauma, or other grievance can make conflict much more likely (as in the Balkans, the Levant, and Africa’s Great Lakes region). It can also make the rise of divisive leaders more likely. On the other hand, in societies that have shared a long history as a nation—Egypt and Iran, for example—nationalism exerts a powerful centripetal force.

**Social Cooperation** looks at the degree of cooperation of people on two levels: across different groups nationally, and locally within communities. Do marriages span social groups? Do members of different groups easily do business with each other? Do they live in the same neighborhoods? On an intragroup level, do communities adapt to social change (by, for instance, creating new institutions)? Do they find ways to offer youth satisfactory opportunities? Do indigenous groups cooperate with migrants to distribute public goods? If mistrust either between or within communities is high, then the capacity to bring people together to solve common problems will be limited.

**Horizontal Inequalities** considers whether there are significant political, economic, and sociocultural inequalities (e.g., representation in government, income levels, or recognition of holidays) between major groups or regions. These—or at least the perception of these—have great consequences for whether people feel they are being treated justly, in turn affecting whether they believe the government is legitimate.

**Transnational Influences** looks at how the actions and ideas of actors beyond a country’s borders impact its domestic dynamics. Certain countries are more subject to external shocks than are others. Geopolitics, for instance, plays a major role in the development of countries near Russia and influences the balance of power in divided countries such as Lebanon and Bahrain. Proximity to other conflicts can also be destabilizing, as recent conflicts in the Sahel illustrate. (Not all transnational influences are conditioned by geography: Some
countries, for example, are highly susceptible to price changes dictated by international markets.)

**Predominantly Influenced by Institutional Sources**

*Effectiveness and Interaction of Institutions* includes some areas that are widely studied, such as the ability of state institutions to deliver public goods (e.g., the rule of law), and others that are often overlooked (e.g., the interaction between customary and formal institutions). The more effective a country’s myriad formal and informal institutions—and the better they work together—the greater their capacity to deliver public goods and constructively arbitrate differences between groups, both essential to legitimacy.

*Equity of Institutions* looks at whether formal and informal institutions act inclusively or exclusively. Do they discriminate against or exclude certain groups or the poor? Do they unfairly allow one group to enrich itself at the expense of others? There is some overlap between this issue and the previous one, but they are separated because their causes and implications can differ substantially. In many cases, equity is more important than effectiveness: different segments of a population are more likely to peacefully accept a government that works mediociously for everyone than one that obviously favors a particular group of people even if it performs better overall.

*Perceptions of Justice* examines the extent to which groups believe that they are or have historically been treated fairly. Groups often have different criteria for judging fairness, whether grounded in respect, process, or inclusion and voice. Such perceptions, often historically rooted and sometimes starkly divergent from those of others in the same country, have great influence over how groups interpret various policies and programs.

*Security* covers the pervasiveness of violence and the likelihood of its employment by subnational groups. A sense of insecurity can easily weaken social cohesion and drive groups to reduce cooperation with each other out of fear. It can augment segregation (as in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq during their wars), making cooperation even less likely. If any group uses coercion against other elements in society to intimidate or capture power—such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the militaries in Egypt, Pakistan, and Myanmar—politics cannot be equitable. The state needs to have a monopoly of violence and exercise it in ways that are seen as legitimate across social groups.

*Accountability Mechanisms* looks at the ability of formal and informal institutions and processes to hold leaders accountable. The institutions include...
organs of the state, such as courts and corruption prevention agencies, as well as non-state organizations including civil society, political parties, and NGOs. Norms can have an outsized impact here: Where public support of political leaders depends on their ability to uphold standards of conduct and due process, those groups that do not hold formal power are more likely to have their rights protected. Elsewhere, leaders are only accountable to a subset of the population.

**Combination of Both Dimensions**

*Breath of Economic Activity* examines how large (compared to the population) and inclusive is the economy, and thus the revenue base, of a country. If the economy is large and furnishes a wide range of groups with opportunities, political actors are more likely to favor compromise and institutionalization that engenders stability. The smaller and narrower the base, the more likely leaders will be inclined to compete for its capture. A heavy reliance on natural resources, for instance, reduces political competition to a zero-sum game, giving leaders both the wherewithal and incentive to undermine institutions and social cooperation.

*Behavior of Leaders* examines whether political, economic, and social leaders act in ways that bring people together or whether they promote a narrow agenda that weakens cohesion and institutions. This depends largely on the effectiveness of various accountability mechanisms (including but not limited to elections) and whether these are broad-based and inclusive. Agency is important—exceptional people (good or bad) can greatly impact social and institutional dynamics. The other eleven issues of fragility constrain the set of choices available to leaders, but elite perceptions and behavior can also transform these constraints.

The relative importance of each category in causing fragility varies by country. In some, strong identity groups and starkly divided politics may be the biggest challenges (e.g., Iraq). In others, horizontal inequalities may create such anger that they matter most (e.g., Kenya). In yet others, weak institutions and insecurity make it very hard to bring groups together at all (e.g., Libya). However, none of these elements work in isolation. Instead, they tend to reinforce each other, either positively or negatively. The more insecurity exists, the more likely people will depend on their subnational (or supranational) identities and mistrust those from other groups. Similarly, the greater unresolved grievances or trauma are, the more likely political narratives will diverge. As such, action on multiple fronts is necessary to significantly alter these dynamics.

In order to reduce bias in measurement, independent actors—affiliated neither with the governments of the countries being assessed nor the development
agencies implementing projects in them—should conduct fragility assessments. Yet, these assessments should be used to produce reports that engage a wide range of local stakeholders and international organizations to ensure they both reflect their concerns and maximize the chance that the results of the report will be widely used. They should take into account variations at different levels (national, regional, local) and in different parts of a society, and examine differences across the broad range of institutions, noting both islands of excellence and failure. Assessments should yield a comprehensive strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis for each country as well as a set of short-term and long-term recommendations. Assessments should be repeated regularly to account for change over time.

**A Toolbox to Counter Fragility**

One of the advantages of using the *Country Fragility Assessment Framework* is that by more specifically measuring the source of fragility, it readily conveys a toolbox of targeted policy and program options, each tool aimed at reducing a particular source of fragility. Many of these are currently used in some form, but are rarely if ever emphasized to the extent necessary, or used in a systematic fashion to reduce fragility. In other words, instead of being an integral part of a broader strategy, they often play a secondary role.

Each broad area of fragility can be connected to countermeasures that might reduce it. For instance, if the quality of interactions among different institutions is deemed weak, a government, NGO, or donor could focus on making formal institutions complementary to less formal ones. In Somaliland, the government is examining the interaction between customary institutions (which play the leading role in governing property rights and settling disputes) and the state, while considering how policy might strengthen these ties. In Ghana, the state is nurturing a hybrid system of justice by expanding the use of informal dispute-resolution mechanisms such as mediation and ensuring that they complement the formal judicial instruments of the state.13

If particularistic political mobilization exacerbates sectarianism, then country leaders could reform institutions and electoral rules to reduce this tendency. Nigeria and Indonesia have enacted electoral rules that require political parties to aggregate support across groups as well as regions and achieve a certain minimum breadth to gain power. Alternatively, leaders could work together to develop and promote nationalistic political rhetoric to counter particularistic appeals, as Tanzania, Singapore, and Indonesia did following their
independence. If unresolved trauma or resentment drives sectarianism, institutions of transitional justice, such as South Africa’s post-Apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission, could effectively address fragility.

Balancing the short term and the long term is crucial to get policymaking right. While many of the factors require gradual change over a long time horizon, short-term triggers cause crises and must be actively managed. These may either be the result of shocks (e.g., price spikes or the death of a leader) or stresses that have built up over a long time (such as social, demographic, or media change). Unfortunately, action aimed at reducing the impact of shocks often comes too late and sufficient action aimed at reducing longer-term threats never comes at all because many of the measures are hard to justify in the absence of a crisis.

Similarly, acknowledging the tradeoffs between different issues—and the political difficulties some pose—rather than assuming that all can be accomplished simultaneously is crucial to implementation. Some ought to be prioritized, while others ought to be set aside, at least in the short term. The key will be to understand what might have the largest impact with the least pushback, as well as to examine what might encourage the creation of a more inclusive dynamic with the least risk.

Tables 2, 3, and 4 lists a broad range of practicable tools to address each source of fragility. It is not meant to be comprehensive, just indicative. There are many other tools that might work to address the individual items. Leaders and specialists who know a particular country well can choose the most salient before strategizing what combination makes sense given the context.

**Thinking Out of the Box**

Just as the Washington Consensus failed to provide a roadmap to economic growth in all developing countries, the widely accepted set of Western statebuilding strategies has foreclosed promising alternative approaches. Instead of thinking about a fixed prescription of political and economic reform, countries must look for creative approaches which address the particular sources of fragility that appear in each context.

The increasing international emphasis on fragility assessments reflects the growing awareness of the need to better target counter measures. The New Deal places assessments at the center of its agenda. The World Bank and leading donors are moving in this direction. The 2015 annual OECD report on fragile states repeatedly “highlights the need for new approaches to assessing and
monitoring fragility using metrics that do not reduce fragility measures to a single index but rather allow for tracking across multiple (and potentially uncorrelated) dimensions."\textsuperscript{15}

This CFAF has powerful implications for fragile states currently undergoing crises. It, for instance, highlights the true sources of Iraq’s disintegration: stark horizontal inequities, longstanding grievances, inequitable power-sharing arrangements, sectarian narratives, and chronic insecurity. Unless the country’s divisions are addressed on multiple fronts simultaneously—by, for instance, better integrating Sunnis into the country’s power structure, addressing grievances, creating an inclusive national narrative, establishing mechanisms to make commitments to minorities more credible, and redesigning electoral rules to force political parties to gain support from all major groups—it is unlikely that the country’s unwinding will be reversed.

In Libya, the country’s centrifugal forces can only be countered by a power-sharing arrangement which makes no major group feel excluded. Given its many political divisions, this probably requires a weak national government and strong city or regional governments. In Nigeria, any solution to the spreading Boko Haram chaos must include a credible policy to address stark horizontal inequities, the feelings of resentment in the north, and the weaknesses of the security forces. Muslim leaders will have to establish a strong positive narrative to counter extremist views. If security forces cannot defend northern citizens, a set of regional or state guards may have to be established or outside actors brought in.

Bolstering deeply troubled states and societies is a task both urgent and daunting. Addressing state fragility in its many shapes requires understanding the specific dimensions of each country and tailoring policies that fit them. Recognizing the extent of the challenges and the diversity of fragile states illustrates that any generalized remedy for state fragility is no more credible than alchemy.

Notes

1. The author thanks Robert Bentley, Ivan Briscoe, Elise Ford, Nate Grubman, Anette Hoffmann, Marjolein Jongman, Bob Lamb, Christian Lotz, Michael Lund, Alexandre Marc, Kevin Melton, Nadia Piffaretti, Steven Schoofs, Brenda Seaver, Lauren Van Metre, and Erwin van Veen for their comments on this essay.
4. See, for example, those formulated by the Fund for Peace and Foreign Policy (which together publish the Fragile States Index), the Political Instability Task Force (originally
the State Failure Task Force), the Brookings Institution, the World Bank, the OECD, or the Institute for Economics and Peace.


6. Samuel P. Huntington argued as much almost half a century ago. See Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968). Intellectual blinders are further solidified by the needs of donors and international organizations to find strong leaders, centralized governments, and formalized processes and institutions with which to work. Their own financial instruments, accountability mechanisms, and human-resource policies limit their ability to do otherwise. This strongly biases action in particular directions whether local situations call for it or not.


8. See http://www.g7plus.org/.


