

Quasi-States, Nation-Building, and Terrorist Safe Havens

Ken Menkhaus

Volume 23, Number 2, Winter 2003

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs23_2art02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Menkhaus, K. (2003). Quasi-States, Nation-Building, and Terrorist Safe Havens. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 23(2), 7–23.

Quasi-States, Nation-Building, and Terrorist Safe Havens

by
Ken Menkhaus

INTRODUCTION

When conventional wisdom and empirical reality part ways, as they periodically do in matters of state, the result is policy which can produce paradoxical outcomes at an astronomical cost. That is precisely what is happening in the international community's approach to nation-building. Current nation-building practices may inadvertently yield exactly the kind of states – weak, ineffectual “quasi-states” – within which terrorist networks thrive, producing the very sanctuaries for terrorism which the US and its allies are seeking to eliminate.

Unintended consequences are hardly a surprise in the messy and chaotic context of collapsed states like Somalia and Afghanistan. But in this instance the problem is also the result of a partial misdiagnosis of the relationship between terrorism and failed states – a product of conventional wisdom led astray by a seemingly self-evident set of assumptions about the kinds of operating environment terrorist networks need. That misdiagnosis, combined with chronically sub-optimal execution of nation-building – one driven by the compromises inherent in multilateralism, financial foot-dragging, sub-contracting to the UN, risk aversion, and a preference for quick fixes – is yielding half-way measures rather than a comprehensive, strategic, and effective long-term response. When it comes to the pursuit of nation-building in the name of combating terrorism, half-way measures are not merely inadequate – they are actively counterproductive.

Nation-building in the 1990s

“Nation-building” – the generally pejorative term used to describe efforts to revive and rebuild governance, peace, stability, and rule of law in places running chronic deficits in those commodities – is enjoying a renaissance of sorts. In the early 1990s the issue served as ground zero for a nasty and partisan foreign policy debate in the US when both the Bush Sr. and Clinton administrations encountered the post-Cold War phenomenon of failed states. Advocates of nation-building justified their position as one of enlightened self-interest, arguing that the anarchy of collapsed states threatened American and global interests

Ken Menkhaus is Associate Professor of Political Science at Davidson College. He is currently working on a study of protracted conflict in the Horn of Africa on a research grant from the US Institute of Peace.

in a stable world order. Detractors viewed nation-building as misguided social engineering that diverted attention and money to small and remote countries of marginal relevance to vital American interests, bogged the US and UN down in Third World quagmires, and eroded the combat readiness of the American military. Worse, these critics argued, nation-building in some instances placed the armed forces in harm's way for what amounted to social work. The 1993 debacle in Somalia appeared to vindicate this position decisively. The disaster in Mogadishu gave nation-building such a bad name that the expression simply went out of parlance for a time, except as an epithet occasionally hurled at liberal internationalists. It also destroyed any appetite American politicians had for humanitarian intervention, an aversion which includes the now embarrassing refusal to respond to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

But lost in the smoke and heat of angry debates over America's policy toward failed states was a loose, passive consensus which emerged more by default than design and which spanned across Republican and Democratic administrations. That consensus was built on several propositions: first, regardless of whether or not collapsed states are a threat to American interests, it is politically necessary to support (or at least appear to support) efforts to address them; second, the US lacks the political will to sustain a long-term commitment to intervention and nation-building in collapsed states and is usually not the appropriate actor for such interventions; third, a direct US role in collapsed states should be limited to initial phases of armed interventions and only when significant American interests are at stake; and, fourth, longer-term, messy, and high-risk tasks of nation-building are best sub-contracted out – usually to the United Nations.

The result is a now familiar pattern. In collapsed states and complex emergencies where the US has strong security or political interests (such as northern Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, Kosovo, Afghanistan), the crisis culminates in a US-led, UN-sanctioned armed intervention. Occasionally a US ally with stronger interests in the crisis area plays the role of initial intervener (France in Rwanda, Australia in East Timor). Thereafter, a rapid handover occurs to a UN operation which enables the US and friends to partially or fully withdraw forces. The UN successor mission includes peacekeeping troops and a collection of UN civilian departments which are tasked with different aspects of nation-building – everything from reforming the judicial and police sectors to overseeing elections to reviving the economy. The UN mission is sometimes joined (and occasionally overshadowed) by multilateral organizations such as the World Bank, the Organization of European Cooperation and Development, or the Organization of American States. Hundreds of non-governmental organizations and a dozen or so UN specialized development agencies (UNICEF, UNDP, UNHCR, etc.) create a crowded playing field for nation-building, competing over donor funds for thousands of unconnected projects promoting a dizzying array of goals: rule of law, judicial and police reform, demobilization, peace-building, good governance,

decentralization, capacity-building, civil society empowerment, gender and minority rights, youth outreach, education, economic recovery, and more. This collection of aid programs is never referred to by donors and implementing agencies as “nation-building” – the term carries far too much political baggage. Instead, agencies from the World Bank to UNDP are savvy enough to refer to this line of work as “post-conflict reconstruction.” But what is happening from Kosovo to Sierra Leone and, most recently, Iraq, is nation-building dressed up in more palatable development jargon.

The denouement to this ritual also follows a familiar pattern. Mounting frustrations and setbacks plague efforts to promote nation-building. Armed conflicts may re-emerge, and criminality soars. Donor interest in the country plummets; budgets drop accordingly. Top international specialists in “post-conflict” development jump to the next front-page crisis, leaving a second-string team of variable quality overseeing projects. Whether these problems eventually culminate in a complete withdrawal from the country (Somalia, Haiti, Angola) or continuation of nation-building efforts in a state of suspended animation (Kosovo), or a hasty declaration of “mission accomplished” despite serious unresolved crises (Cambodia), the final result can rarely be termed a success. When post-conflict development is given only lukewarm financial or political support from major donor states, the intervention can look to some like a charade, with external actors seen as “going through the motions” on a mission no one believes will succeed but which everyone needs to be perceived as supporting.

The sub-contracting out of nation-building tasks to the UN and other agencies has held numerous advantages for the US. First and foremost, it shifts the risk of failure onto another political actor. This allows American political leadership to claim credit for the initially successful portion of the intervention (the part with all the quick and easy photo-op victories – protection of humanitarian relief deliveries, cessation of hostilities, refugee repatriation) while handing the UN the unenviable and high-risk task of long-term post-conflict reconstruction. The UN and its specialized agencies would complain if failure came at some cost to them, but happily for multilateral development organizations they are able to sustain an extraordinarily high rate of failure in “governance” and other post-conflict programs with virtually no repercussions. But America’s preference for sub-contracting its way out of nation-building duty comes with a price – namely, an even higher rate of failure. As Marina Ottaway recently argued, in peace operations “US participation is important because the country is the most powerful member of the international community. Otherwise, the United States sends the message that it doesn’t care what happens next – and in so doing, it undermines fragile new governments and encourages the emergence of feuding factions and warlords.”¹

The high failure rate of nation-building ventures in the interregnum period from 1989 to 11 September 2001 was for the most part acceptable in Washington,

for the simple reason that, with few exceptions, the countries in question appeared to pose little if any threat to vital American interests. Even crisis-ridden Haiti, which attracted a US-led, multi-billion dollar international intervention in 1994 and which has the potential to create considerable headaches for the nearby United States, was quietly abandoned by donors in 2000 out of frustration with political corruption and paralysis. What was significant about interventions in the 1990s was not just the rate at which they occurred, but also the rate at which the US and the West walked away.

This dynamic was a function of the fact that the interventions themselves were driven mainly by political, not strategic, interests – by the need for administrations to “do something” about a stomach-turning humanitarian or political crisis saturating the evening news. When the stakes are political, not strategic, then the policy choices will also be driven by political rather than strategic concerns. That tends to place decision-making authority in the hands of a US president’s pollsters rather than the National Security Council, and focuses priorities more on the appearance of solving a problem (until the media departs for the next crisis) than on actual success.

The Securitization of Nation-Building

That, however, appears to have changed since the *al-Qaeda* attacks of September 2001 and the subsequent war on terrorism. Now, failed states are viewed by American policy-makers as potential security threats of a high order. US President Bush’s National Security Strategy document of September 2002 declares that “America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones.”² A recent study co-produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Association of the United States Army summarizes an argument which has quickly become conventional wisdom:

One of the principal lessons of the events of September 11 is that failed states matter – not just for humanitarian reasons but for national security as well. If left unattended, such states can become sanctuaries for terrorist networks with a global reach, not to mention international organized crime and drug traffickers who also exploit the dysfunctional environment. As such, failed states can pose a direct threat to the national interests of the United States and to the stability of entire regions.³

Nation-building and post-conflict reconstruction have consequently been, or are in the process of becoming, “securitized” – that is, they are now justified not as worthy humanitarian, development, or commercial objectives but rather as a tool with which to promote a broader national security goal. That objective is to combat terrorism by “draining the swamp” to deprive terrorist networks of safe operating bases. Failed states are part of the swamp.

The securitization of nation-building in the aftermath of 11 September has led to a renaissance of sorts for the concept of nation-building. Now, the constituency for post-conflict reconstruction is considerably broader and includes a much larger (though not necessarily enthusiastic) chunk of the US national security establishment than before. At least for the moment, nation-building is earning a grudging place in the portfolio of realist thinking on national security. The lethargic Western responses to nation-building in Afghanistan and Iraq attest to the precariousness of this commitment, which at this point in time appears to be a mile wide and an inch deep.

Detractors of nation-building (generally from the conservative side of the political aisle, but increasingly from the left) still voice occasional concerns but have largely been converted or silenced.⁴ Traditional conservative objections about nation-building which not long ago enjoyed an air of hard-nosed realism now seem timid. A recent *Foreign Policy* cover page featuring the title “Nation-Building Is Not for Sissies” almost seemed a taunt aimed at those who would dare to invoke old buzzwords like “quagmire” and “mission creep” in opposition to nation-building.⁵ Hawks may still prefer strategies which emphasize aerial attacks and hunt-and-destroy missions to eliminate terrorist targets, and may privately bristle at the idea of nation-building, but are hard-pressed to present an alternative as part of the long-term strategy in the war on terrorism, especially since important elements of nation-building – such as building up local policing capacities – are now enshrined in the US National Strategy for Combating Terrorism.⁶

Second, the securitization of nation-building has considerably increased the political and strategic importance of those small and remote countries which not long ago were considered marginal to US national interests. Presidential candidate George W. Bush campaigned on a promise to focus our foreign policy on “big countries,” but like his predecessors Bill Clinton and George H. Bush, he too has found most of his attention drawn to unexpected threats from small and remote countries. In the expanded war on terrorism, the list of countries most often invoked as sites of potential threats – Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, Kenya, Pakistan, the Philippines – reads more like the bottom rung of the UNDP “Human Development Index” rankings.

Misdiagnosis of Collapsed States and Terrorism

The securitization of nation-building insures more sustained American and Western attention to failed states as a matter of national interest. This is a welcome development. But sustained attention is no guarantee of success if nation-building strategies are based on a misdiagnosis about the relationship between collapsed states and terrorism.

Conventional wisdom holds that collapsed states constitute a safe haven for international terrorists. The logic behind this proposition is, on the surface,

entirely reasonable and compelling. Zones of state collapse appear to offer a sanctuary beyond the rule of law, where terrorists can establish bases or staging grounds with little risk of detection. Terrorists will, therefore, naturally prefer the impunity of anarchy to the risks of operating within the reach of a national security and police force.

This was the logic which propelled so many in the US government and media to short-list Somalia as a site for an expanded war on terrorism following the 11 September bombings. Somalia is not only a completely collapsed state – it is an Islamic society with a known and active radical Islamist group, *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyya* (AIAI). As such, it was self-evident that the country would be a likely place for *al-Qaeda* to flee and regroup. The claim that Somalia hosted terrorist camps was repeated so often by government officials and media pundits that it became gospel, despite the absence of credible evidence that such a threat existed in Somalia. It nearly led to direct US military action against suspected terrorist bases in Somalia, until closer investigation revealed no such targets presented themselves in the country. Subsequently, Somalia has been kept under close surveillance, but evidence of significant terrorist threats emanating from within its borders has not, to date, been compelling. The environment assumed to be most attractive as a safe haven for *al-Qaeda* was, for some reason, not.⁷

The case of Somalia suggests that external observers may have been mistaken in our assumptions about the relationship between terrorism and collapsed states. The reality is that, at least up to now, transnational criminals and terrorists have found zones of complete state collapse to be relatively inhospitable territory out of which to operate. There are certainly exceptions – the fiefdoms of drug-lords and radicals in parts of Colombia, for instance. But in general, terrorist networks have instead found safety in weak, corrupted, quasi-states – Pakistan, Yemen, Kenya, the Philippines, Guinea, Indonesia. Terrorist networks, like mafias, appear to flourish where states are governed badly rather than not at all.

Why are areas of state collapse such as Somalia apparently not so attractive as safe havens? First, in zones of complete state collapse, terrorist cells and bases are much more exposed to international counter-terrorist action; violations of state sovereignty by a US Special Forces mission would be less problematic (or would even go undetected) where a central government either does not exist or is unable to extend its authority to large sections of the country. Second, areas of state collapse tend to be inhospitable and dangerous, meaning few if any foreigners choose to reside there. The fewer the foreigners, the more difficult it is for a foreign terrorist to blend in unnoticed. In an environment like Somalia, a non-Somali's presence is known to all, and the agenda of that foreigner a matter of great interest to local communities. To the extent that secrecy matters to a terrorist cell – and it is safe to presume it matters a great deal – a collapsed state is not necessarily an ideal location. There, terrorists may be beyond the rule of law,

but not beyond the purview of curious and suspicious locals.

Third, the lawlessness of areas of state collapse may reduce the risk of apprehension by a law enforcement agency, but it exponentially increases vulnerability to the most common crimes of chaos – kidnapping, extortion, blackmail, and assassination. The same security threats which plague international aid agencies in these areas would also afflict foreign terrorist groups. Once in place, a terrorist cell would find itself at the mercy of hosts who fully appreciate the bargaining leverage they have over the fugitives; the risk of betrayal by local interests hoping to cash in on an anti-terrorist bounty would be quite high. One American defense official concluded that in Somalia “the environment is so opportunistic . . . that any [terrorist] presence there is liable to being sold out.”⁸

Finally, external actors find zones of endemic state collapse and armed conflict a notoriously difficult environment in which to maintain neutrality. Local contacts and supporters are invariably partisans in local disputes, and the external actor – whether an aid agency or terrorist cell – can quickly become embroiled in those disputes and be seen as having “chosen sides.”

The apprehension of suspected terrorist Suleiman Abdalla in Mogadishu in March 2003 is instructive on this point. Suleiman, a Yemeni national believed to have played a central role in the 1998 *al-Qaeda* bombing of the US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, sought refuge in Mogadishu, taking on a business partnership with a Somali as co-owner of a hotel. In March 2003, he was apprehended by some combination of local, Kenyan, and American forces, and turned over to Kenyan authorities for questioning.⁹ The fact that this foreign terrorist suspect was exposed and apprehended in Somalia despite the absence of a functional police force reinforces the argument that stateless Somalia is a treacherous and non-permissive environment for terrorists. Competing Somali rumors which subsequently flowed about the arrest – one claiming he was kidnapped and turned in by a rival sub-clan to that of his Somali business partner, the other that his business partner served him up in order to assume full ownership of the hotel – may or may not be true, but both accounts share the common motif of treachery. On the other hand, the fact that Suleiman was apparently able to live and do business in Somalia for over four years is a worrisome indicator that in some circumstances foreign terrorists are able to exploit Somalia as a safe haven. The case of Suleiman Abdalla suggests that both interpretations are probably right. In the short-term, most anyone can make arrangements to live and work in Somalia. But the longer one stays, the more one accumulates grievances with local partners, the more information leaks out about the visitor, and the more prone to extortion, threats, and betrayal the visitor becomes. This pattern is painfully familiar to international aid agencies, which with only a few exceptions follow a predictable cycle in Somalia – initial welcome, followed by “mistakes” which create enemies, followed by mounting security problems which culminate in termination of the project, often via an inglorious evacuation. This reflects a long-

standing tradition in Somalia of the commoditization of guests, who are quite rightly viewed as resources to conserve, protect, expend, exploit, and dispense with as the situation dictates. By contrast, quasi-states offer a modicum of protection. Governments, however weak, enjoy and fiercely guard juridical sovereignty, forcing the US and key anti-terrorist coalition allies into awkward and not entirely satisfactory partnerships with those governments in pursuit of terrorists. The mixed track record the US has had with the government of Yemen over investigations into the terrorist attack on the *USS Cole* is a case in point. Anti-terrorist joint ventures with governments of quasi-states are cumbersome and often ineffective, since the capacity of such states is often very low. They can also be dangerous, since governments of quasi-states are often riddled with civil servants and military officers with divided loyalties to both the state and the cause. Information-sharing in such a setting can quickly lead to leaks, failed missions, and the danger of compromising informants. Finally, rulers in quasi-states are often exceptionally vulnerable to internal opposition and are as a result unenthusiastic about embracing anti-terrorist actions which might alienate radical groups with whom they have established a *modus vivendi*. This is an important political dynamic even in relatively strong states such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as the journalist Thomas Friedman has so vigorously pointed out.¹⁰

The alternative – to simply violate the sovereignty of a quasi-state in pursuit of individuals or groups suspected of terrorist links – is an option, but one loaded with political complications, a fact which terrorist networks no doubt appreciate. Such an operation would create a political backlash even in a friendly but weak state (such as Kenya, Yemen, or Pakistan), generating a windfall of angry new recruits for *al-Qaeda*, reinforcing the conviction in some quarters that the real threat is American/Western imperialism, and possibly jeopardizing the government in power or forcing it to take anti-American positions for the sake of political survival. A botched operation – one in which innocent locals were killed, or counter-terrorist forces taken hostage – would be enormously difficult to manage if it was conducted without the consent of the government of the quasi-state. Though it is easy to disparage the principle of state sovereignty as a legal fiction, the fact is that a military violation of a quasi-state's sovereignty in the pursuit of terrorists carries a hefty price tag.

A second reason terrorist cells prefer weak states over collapsed states is because they play host to a large foreign community – diplomats, aid workers, businesspeople, teachers, tourists, missionaries, and partners in mixed marriages, among others. That gives foreign terrorists a decisive advantage in their ability to move about and mix into the society without arousing immediate attention. In cases like Kenya and South Africa, where the citizenry is already thoroughly multi-ethnic (including African, Indian, European, and Middle Eastern descent), this advantage is magnified still further. Large, unpoliced, multi-ethnic cities and slums are especially easy places to dissolve into the crowd. The large foreign presence not only provides cover but also a range of soft targets, a reality that

Kenya has now endured twice in recent years – first with the 1998 bombing of the US Embassy, and more recently with the attack on Israeli tourists at Mombasa.¹¹ By contrast, the zones of state collapse – southern Somalia, southern Sudan, eastern Congo, Angola – present a paucity of enticing Western targets, unless that country's crisis happens to attract a UN peace operation.

Third, quasi-states generally feature very corrupt security and law enforcement agencies, but not such high levels of criminality that a terrorist cell is especially vulnerable to lawless behavior. Bribes to police, border guards, and airport officials allow terrorists to circumvent the law even while they enjoy a certain level of protection from it. Whether such corruption is a function of the economic desperation of underpaid policemen or the greed of rich civil servants, the effect is the same – a virtual *carte blanche* to operate under the radar screen of internal and external security monitors. The extraordinary denouement to the December 2002 terrorist attack in Mombasa, Kenya – in which the suspects “escaped” from police who are widely suspected of accepting a bribe in exchange – is the most damning evidence of how corruption produces a permissive environment for terrorists.

All this means that a terrorist network in a region such as East Africa would have a strong and logical preference to work out of Nairobi, Dar Es Salaam, or even Kampala rather than Somalia. And that is precisely what has occurred – the weak quasi-state is repeatedly preferred over the zone of complete state collapse as a base of operation, a lair for evading detection, and a setting for terrorist attacks.¹²

That is not to argue that the world can rest easy about terrorist exploitation of anarchic zones of collapsed states such as Somalia. Areas of state collapse clearly appear to have a niche role to play in the terrorist playbook. Available evidence suggests they are useful primarily as transit stations, through which the movement of men, money, and materiel can be arranged into neighboring states with little fear of detection.¹³ The Horn of Africa is currently awash in unpoliced, cross-border smuggling of small arms, people, and goods; indeed, the top commercial activity in Somalia has for a number been transit trade of basic consumer goods from Mogadishu beach ports overland into Kenya's lucrative market. The use of collapsed states for terrorist transit operations has the advantage of exploiting the already flourishing smuggling networks (so little suspicion is aroused, and hiring of trucks and agents is routinized) while keeping such involvement in the collapsed state short-term in duration, thereby minimizing risks. Local agents need not be members or sympathizers of a terrorist movement; for a fee, virtually any merchant or local warlord will assist in the transit of a shipment, a money transfer, or a convoy of people with no questions asked. This underscores the fact that careful monitoring and surveillance of zones of state collapse is an entirely justifiable component of the war on terrorism. But it suggests that monitoring in those areas should focus more on beach ports and

cross-border smuggling than on a search for terrorist cells and training camps. It is not what is in these zones of anarchy, but what passes through them, which is of greatest immediate danger.

There is also the risk that individual terrorists, either indigenous or foreign, will, like Suleiman Abdulla, seek to safe haven in collapsed states. Indeed, the more successful counter-terrorism measures are elsewhere, the more likely individual terrorists are to turn up in places like Somalia, where they will assume a role in business or an Islamic charity in hopes of remaining undetected. Recourse to such environments is hardly a first choice, however; it is reasonable to presume that a growing presence of foreign terrorists in places like Mogadishu suggests a measure of weakness and lack of alternatives. Still, this scenario demands much closer scrutiny of and transparency on the part of business partnerships and Islamic aid agencies.¹⁴

Swamps of Concern

If an important component of the Western counter-terrorism strategy is to “drain the swamp,” and if collapsed states are among the “swamps of concern,” then the obvious prescription is to promote vigorous state-building and post-conflict reconstruction in collapsed states. Leaving states like post-Taliban Afghanistan in a state of chaos would clearly be self-defeating. Hence, the US and its allies have pledged billions of dollars in post-conflict reconstruction to Afghanistan, a commitment which attracts the usual armada of international agencies crowding the state-building playing field wherever states have collapsed and funding is promised. By the same logic, a current Kenyan-sponsored peace initiative to resolve the Somali crisis and create a government of national unity there has attracted much more active support from the US, the European Union, and some international advocacy groups. The promise of substantial assistance for post-conflict reconstruction is being used to entice Somali leaders to agree to the revival of a central government which would presumably develop a police and security capacity to control terrorist elements within its borders.

In practice, there are a number of distinct problems with the enterprise of rebuilding functional governments in collapsed states with the expectation that they will grow into reliable partners in a war on terrorism. First, many local figures in places like Afghanistan and Somalia simply do not share our agenda. Setting aside the many local authorities with little stomach for a war on terrorism or with lingering sympathies to terrorist causes, the bigger concern are the many more who are not even interested in the revival of effective government and rule of law. Many contemporary crises of collapsed government are products of warlordism and war economies, in which powerful local (and sometimes external) actors profit economically or politically from a continued state of lawlessness, armed conflict, and state collapse. These conflict constituencies – often including the very individuals whom external mediators repeatedly convene to

the negotiating table in hopes of brokering a peace – risk losing out on lucrative illicit business ventures were rule of law to be reintroduced. “Blood diamonds” in several of Africa’s complex emergencies are the most famous but hardly the sole commodity associated with crises wherein war is an instrument of enterprise and “durable disorder” a desired outcome for parochial political or economic reasons.¹⁵

This sobering observation is even more worrisome when one takes account of the fact that these same conflict constituencies exist and operate in some rather strategic quasi-states. In Kenya, for instance, efforts to improve the state’s capacity to crack down on endemic lawlessness are stymied in part because important sections of the Kenyan police are themselves complicit in criminal behavior ranging from corruption to extortion to murder. Likewise, efforts to mediate peace in some of Kenya’s extraordinarily violent pastoral clashes – conflicts which have rendered much of the northern portion of the country beyond the rule of law and hence a zone of concern in the war on terrorism – fail not because these clashes are captive to timeless tribal hatreds but because Kenyan elites at the highest levels have profited from and orchestrate these bloody, commercialized cattle raids.¹⁶

In these situations, nation-building projects which aim to produce rule of law and a robust police and security capacity to enforce the law will either encounter active resistance and sabotage by powerful political actors, or will be quietly subverted by local authorities who will gladly go through the motions required by externally-funded capacity-building programs, but with no intention of allowing them to become effective. This game of charades is distressingly familiar to aid workers and diplomats who have worked in post-conflict settings from Haiti to Sierra Leone.

The Projectization of Nation-Building

Post-conflict reconstruction is also handicapped by the fact that the present system of implementation for nation-building in collapsed states is broken, so much so that it almost appears purposefully designed to produce unwanted results. The long string of failed or frustrated nation-building ventures the international community has attempted in the past 15 years should in and of itself be ample evidence on this score.

In policy discussions, nation-building as an enterprise tends to be discussed in the abstract. Very few of the policymakers and pundits pronouncing judgement on the matter have any direct field experience in post-conflict reconstruction, and even the informed public would be hard-pressed to explain how we actually “do” nation-building. It is simply assumed that the tools, expertise, and system are all in place to build capacity, good governance, and public security. This assumption is reinforced by the often inflated reporting and rhetoric of those agencies which deliver those “products” to post-conflict societies.

The reality is that the operationalization of nation-building on the ground is alarmingly weak. Strategies of post-conflict reconstruction are, to put it charitably, a work in progress. The main actors in funding and delivering post-conflict reconstruction assistance – the US Agency for International Development, the World Bank, the UN Development Program, the UK’s Department for International Development, and dozens of non-profit organizations and think-tanks – have been scrambling to devise effective approaches to capacity-building and good governance projects, but little consensus exists among them. Most of the flood of recent literature on effective peace-building and post-reconstruction aid are either collections of self-evident bromides or are “lessons learned” exercises aimed at sifting through the debris of a decade of failure. More coherent strategies may eventually emerge from these efforts, but for the moment strategy on the ground is ad hoc.

Delivery of post-conflict reconstruction is even weaker than strategy. Nation-building in practice in settings like Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Somalia is little more than a cacophony of hundreds of projects large and small. This “project” orientation to nation-building is a direct import from conventional development assistance, and the template is fundamentally flawed. Multiple donor agencies allocate funds to a virtual army of UN specialized agencies and international NGOs to execute projects within a broader post-conflict reconstruction program. Those agencies jostle at the feeding trough for position in high-visibility sectors and regions. Agencies then often sub-contract out to local organizations to do the actual project implementation – training workshops for police, demobilization projects, media training, teacher training, training of trainers, and so on. Where peacekeeping forces are present, foreign military units with no experience in development work often participate in this process as well, both in direct training and joint exercises with local military forces and in participation in civil society projects such as bridge, road, and school repairs. Efforts are made to coordinate these efforts – indeed, inter-agency coordination meetings become an almost full-time occupation for exhausted aid officials. But coordination in such settings is akin to herding cats. The projectization of nation-building insures that the delivery of post-conflict reconstruction is chaotic and as balkanized as the post-conflict societies for which the aid is intended.

Nation-building at the operational level has been thoroughly captured by the quarreling and competitive agencies which collectively comprise the development industry. This is on aggregate very bad news for nation-building. Those agencies were initially reluctant to tread in the unfamiliar and often dangerous (or at least uncomfortable) settings of collapsed states. But once it became clear in the mid-1990s that post-conflict reconstruction was where the bulk of aid funding was being targeted, the fleet of mainly North American and European NGOs and their UN agency rivals were quick to position themselves as specialists in capacity-building, peace-building, and good governance, though few could legitimately make such a claim. Their success in marketing themselves as

nation-building sub-contractors insured that all of their shortcomings as development agencies were transferred to the nation-building enterprise. These shortcomings include variable and generally low levels of expertise in post-conflict reconstruction; low institutional memory and high personnel turnover; internal reward systems for winning project contracts, not achieving successful results; a strong aversion to cooperation and coordination with rival agencies, which occasionally erupts into open turf battles; preoccupation with internal bureaucratic infighting, budgets, and procedural matters; lack of flexibility and quick-response capacity; a tendency to recruit top local staff at much higher pay than local government can offer, thereby creating a brain-drain which erodes capacity in the name of building it; variable but chronic problems of accountability and transparency; a focus on meeting narrow, superficial, and measurable project outputs rather than the broader and more sustainable objectives of capacity-building; and a very short-term vision and commitment.

The last point is critical. A short-term mentality is antithetical to a long-term process such as nation-building. Yet projects are inherently short-term in nature. Project funding is year-to-year (and often delayed), project proposals are usually premised on impact and completion within a few years, and international project personnel tend to move onward and upward within a year or two. Nothing about a project approach to post-conflict reconstruction lends itself to long-term commitment and vision. The projectization of nation-building thus builds a serious flaw into the enterprise.

The public relations units of these UN specialized agencies and international NGOs will rush to refute this portrait of post-conflict reconstruction, arguing that their organization is not like the others. Some are correct. There are a number of first-rate, thoughtful, and committed organizations working to promote aspects of nation-building. But those agencies operate in a sea of mediocrity, opportunism, and indifference. For the moment, the sub-contracting out of nation-building to UN agencies and international NGOs, and the project template which these agencies operate on, virtually insures that post-conflict reconstruction efforts will fall well short of objectives, even in those rare occurrences when external funding is timely and adequate.

The Security Paradox of Nation-Building

Perhaps the most critical problem of all in nation-building is temporal. The task of rebuilding the capacity of a collapsed state to govern and police effectively is enormous, and even in the best of situations can require a decade or two of sustained assistance. Most assessments of the prospects of nation-building worry that the United States is unable to commit to such long time-frames, that political pressures for quick fixes, exit strategies, and zero casualty interventions will overwhelm efforts to stay the course in collapsed states. This is not a misplaced concern, but there is an even greater temporal obstacle – the problem of

transition from collapsed state to fully functional government. The long stretch of time which passes between state collapse and effectively rebuilt government constitutes a dangerous transitional stage, a period when the government on the receiving end of nation-building efforts is weak, vulnerable, but sovereign – in other words, a quasi-state. Hence the security paradox of nation-building: the very success of post-conflict reconstruction in a collapsed state will produce a temporary political situation in which terrorist networks appear to thrive.

Paradoxes associated with transitional phases in development are not new. Samuel Huntington argued over three decades ago that while both traditional and modern polities are stable, political instability is endemic in countries in transition from traditional to modern society.¹⁷ Likewise, economists have long been aware of the paradoxes of transition in economic development, noting, for instance, the tendency for gaps in income to actually widen as an economy develops before closing again around a larger middle class in a developed economy. If this same transitional dynamic is true in nation-building and public security, then we can expect that current sites of nation-building initiatives will likely become more, not less, dangerous as terrorist safe havens in the short-term. This outcome is possible even if post-conflict reconstruction initiatives are strategically coherent, vigorous, seamlessly coordinated, and flawlessly executed. But it is almost a certainty if current nation-building systems and practices are left in place, delivering the half-way measures which can do no better than produce quasi-states.

Policy Implications

At the heart of the security dilemma of nation-building lies two propositions, both of which are disquietingly true. The first proposition, voiced by advocates of nation-building, correctly identifies collapsed states as a major security threat in the war on terrorism. The second proposition, offered by critics of nation-building, correctly argues that nation-building as currently conceived is a fool's errand.

There are several potential policy responses to this dilemma. One is to quietly abandon the nation-building enterprise and accept that the war on terrorism will be reactive, not preventive, executed as a protracted military and counter-terrorist operation against threats which thrive in swamps we have opted not to try to drain. There are obvious costs and shortcomings with this approach, but it has attractive virtues too. It has the simplicity of a duck hunt, and because it calls for responses for which the US is well-equipped, it is entirely plausible that this approach will win favor if and when frustration levels with nation-building hit critical mass. A recent comment by US Senator Joseph Biden hints at this possibility. "Some of these guys [defense officials] don't go for nation-building," he observed. "They think it's cheaper to just go back in and empty the swamp again if you have to."¹⁸

It is also plausible that nation-building practices will continue with only incremental reforms, despite the fact that they are clearly failing. Nation-building as it is currently pursued has attracted a substantial collection of interest groups eager to advance the cause and quick to attack proposed changes in policy. More importantly, current nation-building practices fulfill the important political objective of demonstrating that we are “doing something” while blame for failure can continue to be conveniently placed on locals and third parties. Nation-building as an elaborate game of charades comes at a cost, however, in that it cedes the playing field to terrorists.

A third option is to fix the broken system of nation-building. This approach accepts the threat assessment that collapsed states are unacceptable security risks, but not the hand-wringing position that nation-building is doomed to fail. Overhauling post-conflict reconstruction so that it stands a much better chance of success would be neither easy nor politically popular. The subcontracting of management of post-conflict reconstruction to the UN would have to be rethought; the US and its allies would need to assume much more direct oversight and control of nation-building programs in collapsed states if nation-building is ever to acquire the necessary level of strategic coherence and competence. Second, the “project” approach to nation-building would also require serious reconsideration, with an eye toward devising more systematic and truly coordinated efforts that may involve direct execution by the US government. Third, much closer attention must be paid to the development of strategies of post-conflict reconstruction which actually work in practice. There are organizations working on innovative and long-term approaches to this challenge, but their critical voice is often drowned out. Finally, in some areas of state collapse the US and a “coalition of the willing” may need to assume more direct involvement in security and policing functions during the long transition from collapse to effective governance, to insure that the transitional period of nation-building is not exploited by terrorists.

Some of these reforms would push the US and its allies into an acutely uncomfortable policy discussion – namely, the politics of trusteeship. Trusteeship-type solutions to the paradox of nation-building and global security enjoy almost no constituency. The term itself is stained with the sins of its distant cousin colonialism. Many voices from the Third World object strongly to any erosion of state sovereignty under any pretext, and would view the proposal to establish a trusteeship over a collapsed state as a neocolonial Trojan horse. The astronomical costs and risks which the US and its allies would have to shoulder in a trusteeship would generate strong opposition to the policy from within the US public and government as well.

For these reasons, trusteeship has been a virtually taboo subject to date. But the topic may soon be unavoidable.¹⁹ Post-war Iraq is the latest and most controversial example of quasi-trusteeship arrangements being assumed by the

US. In Iraq, however, the direct American administration is portrayed as a strictly short-term and transitional arrangement until such time as an interim Iraqi authority can be stood up. The kinds of quasi-trusteeship this analysis suggest may soon be inevitable would be longer-term and more indirect in nature – a security umbrella arrangement under which local law enforcement and governance capacities can gradually be built and strengthened without having to take on the impossible burden of monitoring and asserting terrorist activity within its borders before it has the capacity to do so.

For as unpleasant as trusteeship is, there appears to be no other way to effectively monitor and combat terrorism during the long transition from collapsed state to functional government. The key question – one which merits sustained discussion and debate – is whether a new form of trusteeship can be forged, a progressive rather than neocolonial trusteeship which would constitute an opportunity for, rather than an imposition on, nations in receivership. Such a trusteeship would have to combine the external security oversight required of a war on terrorism while at the same time providing sustained political space for progressive, democratic, and capable new national governments developed by and for local populations.

Endnotes

1. Marina Ottaway, "Nation-Building," *Foreign Policy* 18, no. 5 (September-October 2002), p. 18.
2. The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America" (17 September 2002), p. 1 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss1.html>).
3. John J. Hamre and Gordon R. Sullivan, "Toward Postconflict Reconstruction," *The Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Autumn 2002), p. 85.
4. For a recent conservative critique, see Gary T. Dempsey, "Old Folly in New Disguise: Nation Building to Combat Terrorism," *Cato Policy Analysis* no. 429 (21 March 2002) (<http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa-429es.html>).
5. See the cover of the September-October 2002 issue of *Foreign Policy*.
6. US Government, "National Strategy for Combating Terrorism" (February 2003) (<http://usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/terror/strategy>).
7. This conclusion tracks closely with the assessment reached by Matt Bryden in his article in this issue of the journal.
8. Quoted in a background report, "Somalia/Terror," *Voice of America* (29 May 2003).
9. See "Terror Suspect Flown to US," *The Nation* (Nairobi), 27 March 2003, posted on <http://allAfrica.com>. Like many aspects of this case, the details of the operation which apprehended Suleiman has been the subject of contradictory reports. Some reports portray the episode as a Somali police operation, in which Suleiman was handed over to the Kenyans and US. Others report it as a kidnapping by Somalis. Still others suggest a more direct role by Kenyan and/or American forces. Suleiman's whereabouts were subsequently the subject of even more mystery, with Kenyan officials claiming that he was handed over to the US while US officials suggest that Suleiman remains in the hands of East African authorities. For an account of conflicting statements on the incident, see Kevin Kelley, "Gov't, US Disagree Over Terror Suspect," *The East African* (Nairobi), 2 June 2003.

10. Thomas Friedman, *Longitudes and Attitudes: Exploring the World After September 11* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2002), p. 57.
11. Kenya was also the site of a terrorist attack in 1980, when the Norfolk Hotel was bombed.
12. This is also the conclusion reached by a US Institute of Peace workshop, "Assessing Terrorism in the Horn of Africa: Threats and Responses," Washington DC (28 May 2003).
13. See Ken Menkhaus, "Somalia: Next Up in the War on Terrorism?" *CSIS Africa Notes* no. 6 (January 2002), pp. 1-9; and International Crisis Group, "Somalia: Combating Terrorism in a Failed State," (Brussels: ICG, May 2002).
14. Ken Menkhaus, "Terrorism in Somalia: Threat Assessment and Policy Options," presented at the US Institute of Peace, "Assessing Terrorism on the Horn of Africa: Threats and Responses" workshop, Washington DC (28 May 2003).
15. Mats Berdal and David Malone, eds., *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000).
16. Sam E. Kona, "Conflict and Insecurity Among the East African Pastoralists: The Kenyan Experience," presented at the Oxfam GB Regional Pastoral Programme Workshop, Arusha Tanzania (28 February 2000); and Centre for Conflict Research, "A Conflict Map of Kenya: An Overview of the Conflict Situation in Kenya, Issues Extent, and Effect," The Great Lakes Parliamentary Forum on Peace (Amani Forum) (August 2002).
17. Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968).
18. Quoted in Bill Keller, "The I-can't-believe-I'm-a-hawk Club," *The New York Times* (8 February 2003).
19. Martin Indyk recently broached the subject in reference to Palestine; see "A Trusteeship for Palestine?" *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 3 (May-June 2003), pp. 51-66.