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Exploring the relationship between the fragile African state and Islamist violent extremism

The study of violent extremism (VE) is in flux. This state of flux is evidenced, amongst other things, by the varied, often conflicting, explanations of violent extremism. One of these explanations is state fragility. Post-9/11, state fragility itself has been linked to various permutations of insecurity, not violent extremism alone. Violent extremism has manifested in extremist narratives and political violence, most notably, Islamist terrorism; in countries like Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. Violent extremism has also manifested in wider violent campaigns, including Islamist insurgencies and Islamist proto-states; most notably in central and southern Somalia, northern Nigeria, and northern Mali. Consequently, countering violent extremism (CVE) remains a most vexing policy and strategy challenge facing governments today.

Randy Borum asserts that since 9/11 Islamist violent extremism is "… what many believe to be the most serious contemporary threat to global security". Daniel Aldrich asserts that Sub-Saharan Africa is of interest in the study of Islamist violent extremism for various reasons, including the "…burgeoning youth population, persistent lack of educational, housing and vocational opportunities, long-simmering grievances among marginalised populations, and location on heavily trafficked routes". Following 9/11, then US assistant secretary of state for African Affairs, Susan Rice, also directly linked the fragile African state to Islamist terrorism. With the intimated relationship between the fragile African state and Islamist violent extremism, fierce contestations abound about what we know, and

how we know, in this regard. Steward Patrick, for example, affirms that fragile states "… do often incubate global threats, *but this correlation is far from universal*". Further, which specific conditions, created by state fragility, spawn Islamist violent extremism? Why are some fragile states incubators of Islamist violent extremism and others not? Are all states not fragile in some form or degree, thus nullifying the notion of state fragility, or at least significantly devaluing state fragility as an analytical tool, and a theoretical perspective? The answers to these questions remain subject to conjecture and open to contestation.

Be that as it may, much has been written about the colonial origins of the fragile African state, and the nature and extent of the fragility of the post-colonial African state. Amongst this literature, there is a view that state fragility is more widespread, and more entrenched, in Africa. But state fragility does have its controversies. State fragility, for example, is often cited as a security challenge, but rarely defined or measured. The link between state fragility and Islamist violent extremism is often assumed, but rarely demonstrated. Since its inception in 2005, the Fund for Peace's *Fragile States Index*, can be instructive in this regard. According to the index, in the last three years (2015-2017), 14 of the 20 most fragile states in the world were in sub-Saharan Africa. What is noteworthy is that all 14 countries encapsulate a cocktail of Islamist violent extremism, civil war, insurgency, communal violence, and/or political instability (South Sudan, Somalia, Central Africa Republic, DR Congo, Sudan, Chad, Zimbabwe, Guinea, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Burundi and Eritrea). What is also noteworthy is that except for Haiti, the other countries on the list of 20 most fragile states in the world (Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen) are all challenged by Islamist violent extremism.

The *Fragile States Index* is not without criticism. The index, however, has significant utility as an analytical tool, and offers a window into the fragile African state. As alluded to by Daniel Aldrich and Susan Rice above, state fragility does not only provide the context and opportunity but is an actual driver of Islamist violent extremism. State fragility defines the social, economic, political and external pressures faced by the fragile African state, and the state's frequent (in)capacity to deal with these pressures.

Like the *Fragile States Index*, 2005 is also the year that the concepts violent extremism, CVE, and radicalisation, emerged. In July 2005 *The New York Times* reported that the Bush Administration had exchanged the catchphrase *global war on terror* (G-WOT) for *global struggle against violent extremism* (G-SAVE), in recognition of the violent extremist ideology that informs terrorism. In the same year European policymakers, following the bomb attacks in Madrid (2004) and London (2005), introduced the concepts CVE and radicalisation. Owen Fazer and Christian Nünlist point out that "(t)he idea underpinning CVE is that violent extremists should not be fought exclusively with intelligence, police,

and military means. The structural causes of violent extremism must also be tackled, including intolerance, government failure, and political, economic, and social marginalisation". The field of CVE, however, like Islamist violent extremism, is therefore also in a state of flux.

Islamist violent extremism and CVE studies face various challenges, including the use of nebulous and malleable concepts and the related difficulties with definitions, the lack of reliable empirical data and related unknowns, absence of reliable measuring and evaluation tools, and, the dearth of general theories. As we continue to confront these challenges, and search for frameworks, theories, and analytical tools, state fragility as a theoretical perspective, and the *Fragile States Index* as an analytical tool, promise to add to our understanding of Islamist violent extremism, and CVE.

Additional reading:

Solomon, H. 2015. *Terrorism and counter terrorism in Africa: fighting insurgency from Al Shabaab, Ansar Dine and Boko Haram*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Zeiger, S (ed). 2016. *Expanding research on countering violent extremism*. Abu Dhabi: Hedayah. Available at: http://www.hedayahcenter.org/Admin/Content/File-410201685227.pdf

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2017. *Journey to extremism in Africa: drivers, incentives and the tipping point for recruitment*. New York: UNDP. Available at: http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf

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