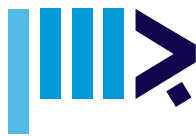


RETHINKING STATE FRAGILITY

Designing an Agenda For Practical
and Policy-Relevant Analysis



المعهد العالمي للدراسات الاستراتيجية
GLOBAL INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC RESEARCH

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The label and language of state fragility has become a prominent feature of contemporary international development assistance and multilateral interventions. This paper will provide an overview of the different elements that have gone into the concept of fragility, its meaning, use, and measurement. There are three key points for reflection on the future use of a fragility framework for policy-making and programming: it should be nuanced, context-specific, and not overgeneralized.

Fragility is generally measured by a broad array of indicators, not all of which are coherent or consistent, but always leading to undesirable outcomes. It can include political and security issues such as the incidence of coups, riots, or political assassinations; civil unrest or outright conflict, authoritarian governance, but also levels of corruption and trust in government. States are fragile when state structures lack political will and/or capacity to provide the basic functions needed for justice, poverty reduction, development, good delivery and management of resources, and to safeguard the security and human rights of their population. One prominent measurement of fragility is the Fragile States Index, which is published annually by the Fund for Peace. It is based on the measurement of twelve indicators in four “baskets.” Similarly, the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (the g7+) converges its concerns into five “peacebuilding and statebuilding goals.”

However, these methodologies have shortcomings in considering the relative importance of highly context-specific social processes. First, the term ‘fragile’ is not normatively neutral and is most often deemed demeaning by the affected states. Second, overall rankings and aggregate scores in indices serve to oversimplify complicated problems and ignore the complexity and context-specific character of fragility and may not always have a direct input into policy recommendations. Third, fragility is often *relational* – i.e., it implicitly rests on a conception of what a non-fragile state is.

Exogenous factors also serve as drivers of fragility in some situations. For e.g., private actors and interests, such as foundations, lenders or corporate actors, are changing the landscape of aid, raising complex issues of sovereignty and autonomy. There are also instances, or moments, where fragility can be seen in more conventionally “stable” or “core” states, such as Russia, the United States, Greece, and the UK. Fragility can also creep in slowly, rather than rear its head in a dramatic fashion. One example is Greece and its debt crisis of 2009.

The objective of GISR’s research is to address five states that are high on the international fragility agenda. These are Afghanistan, Lebanon, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. To date, most discussions of fragility have taken a “top-down” or bird’s eye approach to mapping and understanding fragility. This has facilitated international comparisons and priority setting, but has not been helpful in shaping specific programs and policies to meet the needs of populations in the short or long term or to strengthen accountable and effective institutions. Therefore, a bottom-up approach, based on a careful diagnostic of local conditions, including drivers of fragility, sources of resilience, and consequences of fragility,

is needed. Qatar offers both financial support and mediation, and works on several levels to resolve disputes among local and regional powers with an integrated approach between short-term initiatives and long-term objectives.

KEY MESSAGES

- ▶ The language of “fragile and conflict-affected states” has circulated widely in the development, humanitarian, and security communities.
- ▶ This background paper highlights the meaning of fragility, ways of using/measuring it, along with some caveats and cautionary notes.
- ▶ More than one billion people live in fragile and conflict-affected states, where the causes/impacts of crises can be diverse – warfare, subnational violence, economic crises, human rights violations, refugee flows, and, at the most extreme, a near-total breakdown of state institutions.
- ▶ The three key points of a fragility framework are that it should be nuanced, context-specific, and not overgeneralized.
- ▶ States are fragile when state structures lack political will and/or capacity to provide the basic functions needed for justice, poverty reduction, development, good management of resources, and to safeguard the security and rights of their population.
- ▶ One prominent measurement of fragility is the Fragile States Index, which is published annually by the Fund for Peace. It is based on the measurement of twelve indicators in four “baskets.” Similarly, the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (the g7+) converges its concerns into five “peacebuilding and statebuilding goals.”
- ▶ However, these methodologies have shortcomings in considering the relative importance of highly context-specific social processes. The term ‘fragile’ is not neutral and is most often deemed demeaning by the affected states. Second, overall rankings and aggregate scores in indices serve to oversimplify complicated problems and erase the subtleties of each country’s particular circumstances. Third, fragility is *relational* – meaning that it implicitly rests on a conception of what a non-fragile state is. The implicit liberal teleology emphasizes certain forms of governance or economic arrangements, and is not normatively neutral.
- ▶ Exogenous factors also serve as drivers of fragility in some situations. For e.g., recently, private actors and interests, including foundations or corporate actors, and lenders have had a role to play because much of the debt burden of fragile states is owed to private and commercial banks, which need to be included in the policy and programmatic solutions to fragility, raising complex issues of sovereignty and autonomy.
- ▶ We can also look beyond what are classically considered fragile states to look at instances, or moments, where fragility can be seen in more conventionally “stable” or “core” states. Extended moments of fragility on political, social, or economic dimensions can be easily discerned in examples such as Russia facing the consequences of its war in Ukraine; the United States under President Trump;

Greece when it faced its debt crisis in 2009; and the UK following its decision to leave the EU. All of these factors reflect increasing fragility on at least a dimension highlighted above.

- ▶ Fragility can also creep in slowly, rather than rear its head in a dramatic fashion. One example is Greece and its debt crisis of 2009.
- ▶ To date, most discussions of fragility have taken a “top-down” or bird’s eye approach to mapping and understanding fragility. Therefore, a bottom-up approach, based on a careful diagnostic of local conditions, including drivers of fragility, sources of resilience, and consequences of fragility, is needed.
- ▶ The objective of GISR’s research is to address five states that are high on the international fragility agenda. These are: Afghanistan, a strong authoritarian state; Lebanon, a weak state; and Syria, Libya, and Yemen, fragmented states with various internal governance structures and many international stakeholders present in different configurations/roles.
- ▶ Qatar contributes to economic stability, offers mediation, aids those in need in each of these states, and works on several levels to resolve disputes among local and regional powers.
- ▶ A careful balance must be struck between short-term stabilization initiatives and long-term development objectives to promote smooth transitions.

Introduction

The political discourse on state fragility has become a prominent feature of contemporary international development assistance and multilateral interventions, as reflected in countless statements and strategy documents of actors as diverse as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and major international donors. Ever since the World Bank's 2011 flagship report, *Conflict, Security and Development*, and the publication of the first OECD report on monitoring resource flows to fragile states (2005), and leading up to the 2019 US Global Fragility Act, the language of “fragile and conflict-affected states” has circulated widely in the development, humanitarian, and security communities. Significant resources are now being devoted to practical programming and analysis of fragility and fragile states.¹ The label and language have come under scrutiny and criticism, but are now deeply embedded in policy and programmatic frameworks.²

“Fragility” as a concept has been intended to provide both a global comparative overview of some important global challenges and more specific guidance on where and how donors and international organizations should concentrate their efforts.³ The concept has taken on a life of its own, where policy makers and scholars have attempted to describe, explain the causes of, and even measure fragility (through such things as the Fund for Peace's Fragility Index, or the OECD's *States of Fragility* reports). However, a donor-centered and macro-level comparative (and numerical) overview does not always provide useful insight for more micro- or national-level policies and programs. Can careful analysis and more context-specific application of the concept of fragility provide a useful tool for future policy-making? What kinds of policies and politics does it make possible, and what obscures current geopolitical and global economic realities? How can the concept of fragility be made “fit for purpose” to meet 21st century challenges in a balanced and equitable manner?

This background paper will expand on some of these issues and provide a draft roadmap for a tailored agenda for policy-relevant research and analysis to be undertaken by the Global Institute for Strategic Research (GISR). It will first provide a “primer” and overview of the different elements that have gone into the concept of fragility, illustrated by its use by major multilateral organizations or donors. It will then highlight some caveats and cautionary notes that must be kept in mind when using fragility as a policy or programmatic framework to avoid falling into some traps. The final section will zoom in on particular states of interest to the GISR to sketch a preliminary assessment of how “fragility analysis” can form a central pillar of its action-oriented analysis.

Overall, the objective is *not* to provide yet another definition or concept of fragility, but to highlight three key points for reflection on the future use of a fragility framework for policy-making and programming:

- ▶ It should be nuanced and context-specific, taking into account that different dimensions of fragility are not necessarily comparable and might be more (or less) important at different phases of a conflict or fragility cycle (conflict or crisis, rebuilding, transforming, sustaining).

- ▶ It should be embedded in local perspectives (including those of civil society), considering the most important impacts of fragility on state-society relations and the well-being of communities.
- ▶ It should be practically oriented toward shaping policies and programs in specific issue areas.

Context

More than one billion people live in “fragile and conflict-affected states,” in a diverse array of crises characterized by warfare, subnational violence, economic crises, human rights violations, refugee flows, and, at the most extreme, a near-total breakdown of state institutions.⁴ Places such as Somalia, the former Yugoslavia, Sudan, Haiti, Yemen, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have appeared high on “league tables” of fragile states. Within the region of concern to Qatari policy, states such as Afghanistan, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Libya all rank relatively high on various measures of fragility, which will be discussed in more detail below.

However, if we are to properly understand state fragility and how it plays out in different contexts, it is important to clarify two aspects of the concept of the state. One central and widely held idea about the state is that the state is an institution that claims the monopoly over the legitimate use of force,” an idea enshrined by Max Weber.⁵ This understanding of the state is built on older, more established conceptions of sovereignty, is varied in its manifestations across the world (few states possess a *practical* monopoly over the use of force, for example), and is central to most conceptions of the modern state.⁶ In return for this monopoly, the state provided order and security for its population. To achieve this, the state required the capacity to raise revenue and the ability to dispense justice. Revenue generation, through taxation or rents, is central to all other functions of a modern state.⁷ The ability to deliver justice (order and security) of course also requires the previous two elements; the state must be able to be the sovereign arbiter of that justice, and it requires revenue to be able to dispense said justice. Although the parameters of justice are set by legal codes (traditions, decisions, etc.) that originate within the state itself, it also implies respect for the rule of law, something that goes beyond the arbitrary exercise of state power.⁸

Contemporary conceptions of the state are also attentive to the relationship between the state and society. In addition to security, order, and justice, the state also has the core function of *representing* the political aspirations of its citizens, along with an *economic welfare* function as an efficient mechanism for enforcing property rights and securing markets that allow capitalism to flourish. Following the liberal tradition of political thought, this state-society relationship can be seen as a process of ‘social contracting’, either between rulers and subjects or among subjects themselves, by which individuals surrendered their unlimited freedoms to live within a civil order that therefore enjoyed a certain political legitimacy. Following a political economy tradition, the modern state also has a redistributive and welfare function (basic services and needs).⁹ These elements of the state are central to our understanding of how (and why) a state may become fragile or to identify where more robust state institutions can forestall the possibility of fragility.

Against this backdrop, how should we understand and measure – fragility. First, fragility is generally measured by a broad array of indicators, not all of which are coherent or consistent. It can include political and security issues such as the incidence of coups, riots, or political assassinations; civil unrest or outright conflict, authoritarian governance, but also levels of corruption and trust in government; effective delivery of public services, or overall well-being of the population. All of these reflect a certain idea of

what a “non-fragile” state should look like and what makes it effective in terms of delivering security and justice, representative and accountable institutions, and socioeconomic stability. It also implicitly or explicitly includes a set of norms for how a state should behave domestically and internationally; thus, the term is not politically neutral. The diversity of indicators that go into the concept of fragility implies that policy makers and analysts need to undertake a much fine-grained and context-specific analysis of any given situation if appropriate tools and programs are to be put into place to address fragility. This is particularly important because fragility, while in itself a serious problem for the security and well-being of the population, is often directly associated with the risk of violent conflict. As noted by the OECD in its 2020 *States of Fragility* report, “violent conflict is multidimensional, and addressing it requires a sound analysis of the underlying root causes of conflict and fragility.”¹⁰

Two issues are central here:

- ▶ A coherent account of the “causal pathways” by which fragility leads to undesirable outcomes (including but not exclusively violent conflicts), rooted in a local and context-specific analysis of particular situations;
- ▶ An assessment of the cost-effectiveness and efficiency of various approaches to addressing and overcoming some of the root causes of fragility, moving toward stable and effective governance.

Both are essential for escaping the “fragility trap” in which many states find themselves beset by endemic or cyclical bouts of violence, insecurity, and vulnerability for their populations. Since many of the indicators used to assess fragility are both potentially *causes* or *consequences* depending on the circumstances, it is important to carefully untangle the various elements that might be at play in a given context in order to design effective policies. Likewise, the instruments at the disposal of the international community and major donors are often maladapted to the situation. For example, humanitarian and development assistance can exacerbate fragility if it reinforces illegitimate governance structures. Stabilization operations driven by security concerns with the idea of “ungoverned spaces” and havens for violent extremism can trigger organized opposition among a population and reinforce the role of security forces that already have bad reputations among the local population. Therefore, the tools deployed must fit with the diagnoses and challenges that are faced and be regionally, nationally, and even sub-nationally or locally context-specific, rather than being “off the shelf” solutions of convenience.

Unpacking Fragility: A Primer

Fragility can be defined and operationalized in many ways. Perhaps the most general definition is as follows: “states are fragile when state structures lack political will and/or capacity to provide the basic functions needed for poverty reduction, development, and to safeguard the security and human rights of their population.”¹¹ Or, to take a definition that has been endorsed by several fragile states themselves and is slightly more subtle and positively focused, it is:

a period of time during nationhood when sustainable socioeconomic development requires greater emphasis on complementary peacebuilding and statebuilding activities such as building inclusive political settlements, security, justice, jobs, good management of resources, and accountable and fair service delivery.¹²

Both of these understandings, taken from multilateral policy frameworks (the OECD and the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding – the g7+), focus on the *consequences* of fragility, but do not define fragility by themselves. In addition, state fragility is usually understood at the national level, although that fragility often has both regional consequences and causes and is sub-national or local in nature (as is evident from the cross-border dimensions of the multiple crises in Afghanistan). The examination of the phenomenon is also driven mainly from a donor perspective with the aim of providing the most effective ways of managing resources allocated for those countries.¹³ Drawing upon these ideas, various efforts have been undertaken to measure the political and institutional performance of nations around the world using a variety of methods to assess each nation’s degree of fragility.

One prominent and widely available such measurement is the Fragile States Index, which is published annually by the Fund for Peace. The index is based on the measurement of twelve indicators in four “baskets,” with more precise indicators in each basket. They are:

- ▶ Cohesion: Security apparatus, group grievances, factionalized elites;
- ▶ Economic: Economic decline, uneven economic development, and brain drain;
- ▶ Political: State legitimacy, public service delivery, human rights, and the rule of law;
- ▶ Social: Demographic pressures, refugees, and IDPs, and external intervention.¹⁴

Each possible indicator in each basket is weighted equally 0-10, with an aggregate score of 120. Similarly, the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (the g7+), while broadly critical of the focus on comparative and aggregate quantitative assessments, broadly converges on a similar set of concerns. Its five “peacebuilding and statebuilding goals” include

- ▶ Legitimate Politics: Foster inclusive political settlements and conflict resolution.
- ▶ Security: Establish and strengthen people’s security.
- ▶ Justice: Address injustices and increase people’s access to justice.
- ▶ Economic Foundations: Generate employment and improve livelihoods.
- ▶ Revenues & Services: Manage revenue and build capacity for accountable and fair service delivery.

It was designed to reflect a partnership approach that involved not only donors but also fragile states and civil society from both Northern and g7+ states.

Aside from the highly qualitative nature of many of these indicators and their generally “liberal” orientation, a host of possible factors contributing to fragility are deployed. For example, the indicator for state legitimacy includes elements such as confidence in the government, peaceful demonstrations or riots, corruption, political assassinations, and leadership. Similarly, the underlying ideas regarding the nature of the state, state-society relations, and political economy are essentially liberal, entailing such things as representative and accountable leadership, inclusive politics, a strong national identity, rule of law and transparent institutions, public service delivery, and an open economy.

The methodological shortcomings are numerous, and at least three can be highlighted. First, an index that aggregates scores across different categories assumes that they are in some sense equal and substitutable – that a score of 6 on political indicators captures the same “amount” of fragility as a score of 6 on social or economic indicators. This is not a robust way to consider the relative importance of highly context-specific social processes. Second, most indexes “include *correlates* of fragility (such as high infant mortality, for example), possible *causes* (such as the lack of democracy), and predicated *consequences* (such as humanitarian disasters),” an analytically dubious process that renders an index almost useless for policy-making or programing.¹⁵ Third, most of the indicators are almost certainly correlated with each other. For example, a military takeover (a cohesion indicator) might lead to the suppression of political rights (a political indicator) and population displacement (social indicator). This type of “double counting” reinforces lower scores at the extreme end of the index and provides no practical guidance for untangling or addressing the underlying causes of fragility.¹⁶ Finally, and as highlighted by the g7+ fragile states themselves, these indicators do not take into account the different stages from crisis/conflict to transformation and sustainability.

Multilateral institutions follow similarly complex procedures to arrive at rankings. The OECD disaggregated fragility along six dimensions – economic, environmental, political, security, human, and societal – and within each dimension, 8-12 indicators were used to come up with a composite measure.¹⁷ The indicators include territorial control, military spending, attitudes toward violence against women or the presence of criminal networks (security dimension), or clientelism, corruption, political violence and political rights (political dimension), or access to basic services, primary education and human inequality (human dimension). The way in which indicators are arrived at and the process of developing a composite score are highly qualitative and difficult to decipher. Most data are from publicly available sources such as the World Bank or the non-governmental V-Dem project (the full list of indicators and the most recent chart of states of fragility are in Annexes II and III).¹⁸

The OECD rankings are particularly significant because they assess the adequacy of aid flows to fragile states and provide a “steering mechanism” for bilateral donors to shift how bilateral donor assistance is allocated, both in *how* development assistance was spent and in *where* it was allocated. Much of this work was developed and promoted through the OECD’s International Network on Conflict and Fragility, which brought together all major donors to develop guidance notes, lessons learned, and best practice strategies to tackle fragility, as a means of influencing bilateral ODA practices (OECD, 2022).¹⁹ Switzerland, for example, notes that “around half of the countries and regions in which Switzerland is actively involved qualify as fragile,” and in 2016, the UK Department for International Development committed to allocating 50% of its assistance to fragile states.²⁰ Similarly, the WBG’s fragility “classification aims to inform strategic and operational decision-making within the World Bank Group” in order to ensure that “the WBG’s strategic and programmatic focus in countries affected by FCS-related issues is adapted and tailored to the diverse challenges faced by these countries.”²¹ In 2020, the World Bank adopted a specific strategy to address fragility, with support to countries affected by fragility, conflict, and violence increasing by 30% to reach 41% of total financing.²²

It is worth noting, however, that international aid delivery has been susceptible to change, both in terms of what constitutes aid and the mechanism by which it is dispensed. The Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War saw a decline in Russia as a consistent source of aid (which had hitherto been mainly concessional trade and military assistance), a decrease in average aid budgets, and the reprioritization of aid agendas toward poverty alleviation.²³ Following the events of 9/11, however, the United States (and others) increased their aid expenditure (at least until 2007), but much of this spending was devoted to new forms of security-related aid – leading to what some called the “securitization of development” assistance.²⁴

The Use and Abuse of Fragility

Fragile state classifications are often a hot topic of discussion in both academic and international political circles, and new or refined models have emerged as a result of more thorough analysis and data availability from organizations such as the UN, World Bank, OECD, and universities and academic centers. For example, the OECD expanded the measurement of its fragility framework to explicitly include a human dimension in 2022, even though the human dimension (and state-society relations) was implicit in its earlier definition. Interestingly, the idea of a broad “fragility spectrum” has been invoked by the G7+, which developed it as a diagnostic tool to assess progress on the five elements of its definition of fragility noted above. It was designed to address the key concern that the “measurement and categorization of fragile states according to donor monitoring frameworks, which try to assess the nature of their situations with a standard yardstick,” can fail to capture progress in key areas and provide a blurry overall assessment.²⁵ Nonetheless, even when refined, one can question the effectiveness of these indices in resolving issues in fragile states.

There are at least four caveats to keep in mind before embracing the concept of fragility wholeheartedly, and these represent practical and political rather than just conceptual challenges. First, the term is not normatively neutral and is most often deemed demeaning by the affected states. With a few exceptions, states have not embraced the label of fragility as a description of their status, and the mere fact that a country is labeled ‘fragile’ is seen as double-edged – potentially unlocking access to resources while creating long-term dependencies and negative perceptions. The language of fragile states is only the most recent in a long line of Western ideas about how to govern the globe – from the imperial *mission civilisatrice*, to the description of the Ottoman Empire as the “sick man of Europe” propped up by other great powers, to the League of Nations mandates system. Such language provided a shared framework to facilitate the collective action and was part of the great power global governance mechanisms and ordering principles. This is clearly the case for the concept of state fragility, and highlights that there is little new in such global ordering practices: “the discourse must be recognized as a contemporary successor to a much longer genealogy of imperial discourse about Africa and other non-European societies.”²⁶

Second, overall rankings and aggregate scores in indices serve to oversimplify complicated problems and erase the subtleties of each country’s particular circumstances. They also ignore the diverse situations that might exist within a country, particularly the islands of stability and prosperity that may coexist in the middle of conflict and fragility. Although these tools can offer insightful information, they frequently ignore the complexity and context-specific character of fragility and may not always have a direct input into or impact policy recommendations. For example, although insecurity (conflict, violence, weak state institutions) is a key component of fragility, only 13% of aid allocated in 2018 went to “peace-related objectives, including peacebuilding, basic safety and security, governance, and inclusive political processes.”²⁷ Since “politics” broadly defined is central to fragility, the relatively low attention paid to issues such as legitimacy, political institutions, or service delivery suggests a disconnect between diagnosis and treatment. Aid allocations themselves are also determined by a host of other

considerations, including geopolitical or historical (colonial considerations), trends in donor countries, and idiosyncratic factors. From a regional perspective, for example, Arab Gulf States tend to generously contribute to UN counter-terrorism efforts but relatively little to peacebuilding efforts (except through more traditional development assistance channels and mechanisms).

Hence, policymakers should use them as a supplement to other sources of information, and a more locally focused and customized strategy based on a thorough analysis of each nation's unique circumstances may be more successful in providing guidance to tackle the issues facing any particular fragile state. In general, fragility indices suffer from a "lack of solid theoretical foundations, which leads to confusion between causes, symptoms, and outcomes of state fragility."²⁸

Third, besides often unclear definitions, fragility is *relational* – meaning that it implicitly rests on a conception of what a non-fragile state is. Simply looking at the Fragile States Index annual map of the world (Annex I) gives a pretty clear idea of what states, namely the OECD or Western world, are considered "nonfragile." The implicit liberal teleology emphasizes certain forms of governance (in which politics must be inclusive and institutions should follow the rule of law and be accountable and fair), specific (neo-liberal or open) economic arrangements, or particular state-society relations, and is not normatively neutral.

The only systematic attempt to overcome this divide has been in the g7+ process, which brought together in a partnership forum donor states and states that willingly embraced the label of fragility as a means to work collaboratively to move beyond it. This also created a means for many countries with similar challenges to work together to shape the perspectives and policies of donor countries. In a sense, the g7+ initiative was born out of frustration with the purely donor-led vision of state fragility (and its programmatic implications) and "offers an auspicious entry point for southern governments to contest the principles of global liberal governance."²⁹ As the g7+ initiative noted, "in many countries, the term 'fragility' is itself highly controversial, and many prefer to focus on 'resilience' as the positive inverse of fragility" and that it "is different in every context."³⁰

Finally, it treats fragility as almost purely an endogenous phenomenon, approximately self-inflicted, and rooted in domestic political processes (and absences) disconnected from any external influences or structural conditions (export dependence and terms of trade, unequal investment relationships, effects of globalization, history of colonial rule or conquest/invasion, etc.).³¹ As a result, policies often place the onus on nationally or locally led assessments of the "causes, features, and drivers of fragility as well as the sources of resilience within a country."³² This tends to limit the discussion of fragility to a dialog between fragile states and formal Western donors, while diverting attention from the exogenous factors at play, and in particular, the ways in which international factors (such as globalization) and actors (such as international financial institutions) can also serve as drivers of fragility in some situations. Yet the landscape of aid flows into fragile states is increasingly complex. For example, recently, private actors, including lenders, have had a role to play because much of the debt burden of fragile states is owed to private and commercial banks, which need to be included in the policy and programmatic solutions to fragility.³³ In addition, private actors and interests, such as foundations or corporate actors, are also changing the landscape of aid, raising complex issues of sovereignty and autonomy.

States suffering from high or increasing fragility and with a low institutional capacity, particularly with a large debt burden, often see infringements on sovereign prerogatives as a means to halt spiraling instability.³⁴ Institutions such as the Gates Foundation, for example, play an important role

in determining health care priorities, and recent examples illustrate how private interests can deliver security- or military-related assistance, for example, the recent use of Starlink satellite communications in the context of the war in Ukraine.³⁵ In general, competing aid foundations, charities, and private actors often make demands on how recipient states can dispense aid money, potentially ignoring local expertise or priorities in resource allocations.³⁶ Similarly, increasing interest in states with high resource extraction potential but institutional fragility is often subject to pressure to link assistance to concessional access to natural resources, from both private (Wagner group) and state actors (Belt and Road Initiative). In all cases, the causes and consequences of fragility are an entanglement of endogenous and external factors in the context of globalization and porous borders.

Fragility in a Global Context

With this understanding of what might constitute a fragile state, we can also look beyond what are classically considered fragile states to look at instances, or moments, where fragility can be seen in more conventionally “stable” or “core” states. Extended moments of fragility on political, social, or economic dimensions can be easily discerned in examples such as Russia facing the consequences of its war in Ukraine; the United States under President Trump; Greece when it faced its debt crisis in 2009; and the UK following its decision to leave the EU. All of these factors reflect increasing fragility on at least a dimension highlighted above.

The classical definitions of a state, or even the first “cohesion indicator” used in the Fragile States Index, are inherently concerned with the monopoly of the use of force and the means by which violence can be dispensed. The events of June 24, 2023, in Western Russia, which saw the private military company (PMC) Wagner attempt to march on Moscow,³⁷ can be seen as a clear moment of fragility for the Russian state. While the situation is complex and nuanced, given the war in Ukraine, the interests of different state elites, and the widespread use of the Wagner PMC across the globe,³⁸ such an event remains a clear example of how a central core power (a permanent member of the UN Security Council and relatively large economy) can experience intense moments of fragility that challenge some of the most fundamental aspects of the state. The largest world power is also not beyond moments of fragility especially in indicators of social cohesion and political stability. The turbulence of the 2016 election of President Trump, the 2020 election, challenges to the peaceful transition of power in 2021 signaled a significant increase in state fragility.³⁹ According to the Fragile States Index, the U.S. dropped 12 points in four years – a trend line hardly matched by any OECD state.⁴⁰ Although the situation has stabilized, when a state and its democratic system face a direct challenge to the concept of a peaceful transition of power, it is clearly “fragile” in important ways.

Fragility can also creep in slowly, rather than rear its head in such a dramatic fashion. One example is Greece and its debt crisis of 2009. To alleviate this crisis, Greece received \$110 billion from several international bodies, including the IMF, who imposed as a condition some structural adjustments and reforms that had a widespread effect on the Greek population.⁴¹ Its Fragile State Index score slipped by 16 points between 2006 and 2016, which was linked to economic austerity and exacerbated by refugee flows after 2015.⁴² Clearly, the funding and debt relief arrangements removed some of Greece’s fiscal and economic sovereignty by placing direct or indirect control over these elements in the hands of EU institutions that dictated the path toward Greece’s relief. This challenge to democratic institutions (and their reflection of the popular will) potentially exacerbated and deepened the socioeconomic crisis.⁴³ Similarly, the post-Brexit UK faces increased economic fragility in some areas including overall productivity, shrinking or slowing of wage growth, and foreign trade capacity.⁴⁴ Between 2016 and 2023, the UK dropped almost ten points in the Fragile States Index, particularly in the economic and sociopolitical dimensions.⁴⁵ This relationship is not to be understated: the social, military, economic, and political aspects of stability/fragility are all ultimately linked and mutually reinforcing in most cases.

Similarly, these examples show that most states can be susceptible to some forms of fragility in the wrong circumstances or contexts.

Rehabilitating the Concept of Fragility For Policy Relevance

The above analysis is not intended to dismiss entirely the utility or importance of the concept of fragility, for it has become a durable part of the policy lexicon. The fragile state discourse has oriented development assistance away from the provision of basic needs and poverty reduction toward more politically controversial governance and security/stabilization interventions. It has also facilitated the fusion of traditional development concerns with global security concerns and provided a justification for military intervention in places such as Afghanistan and the Sahel. In addition, it has moved responsibility for responding to fragility to the regional and national level – although sometimes this has also off-loaded responsibility entirely to regions (as is the case with the mantra “African solutions for African problems”), obscuring the broader systemic or external forces at work.

Not all of these effects are necessarily harmful to human development or local and regional stability. A focus on certain dimensions of fragility, particularly the importance of building local capacities to meet the basic needs of the population, or taking into account conflict dynamics and underlying tensions in designing development assistance policies, has potentially reduced insecurity and deprivation in some cases. Thus, the challenge is to recalibrate and rehabilitate the term for the specific policy and practice. Undeniably, there are people and populations living in conditions of extreme vulnerability, where political institutions have failed to provide for basic needs and public goods, and where the spillover consequences affect neighboring states and regions. Recognizing and analyzing the causes of breakdown and the potential sources of resilience for rebuilding are critical tasks.

To date, most discussions of fragility have taken a “top-down” or bird’s eye approach to mapping and understanding fragility. This has facilitated international comparisons and priority setting, but has not been helpful in shaping specific programs and policies to meet the needs of populations in the short or long term or to strengthen accountable and effective institutions.

A regional examination of the phenomenon may also lead to a more fine-grained or contextual understanding of the phenomenon and possibly more precise interventions at the sub-state level – including the ability to isolate fragility within sub-national regions by enhancing local autonomy and addressing sub-national drivers of fragility, such as the exclusion of minorities.⁴⁶ Therefore, a bottom-up approach, based on a careful diagnostic of local conditions, including drivers of fragility, sources of resilience, and consequences of fragility, is needed. To return to the analogy discussed above: policy makers need to be clear on what types of shocks will or have produced which types of negative outcomes in fragile contexts; and what types of strategies to build resilience would be appropriate, efficient, and cost-effective.

Several aspects of this locally focused approach to fragility could be important avenues for analysis. The first would be a focus on the fragility of specific systems (political, economic, public services, resource exploitation, scarcity, human well-being). This would assess which systems are under the most stress (drawing from macro-level analysis such as those of the OECD or Fund for Peace) and acknowledges that fragility becomes “fracture” when excessive stress is placed on these systems, whether from internal or external factors. In other words – what leads the fragile vase to “break” and why this particular vase and not another.

A second locally oriented angle for analysis would be to distinguish between fragility that is baked into the “state” from the outset (which is likely the case in states such as Afghanistan or many post-colonial states in Africa and Asia), and those situations in which states are “made fragile” because of particular international or regional interventions and policies (including peacemaking policies). An example could be the case of Bosnia after the Dayton Accords, which adopted a minimalist solution designed to end the violence but failed to address many of the underlying issues that contribute to the fragility of the Bosnian state. To simplify, the former could be described as suffering from “capacity gaps” and the latter from “legitimacy gaps.”⁴⁷ These two scenarios have very different implications for policy and can overlap in practice.

In the first case, fragile states have endemic or long-standing characteristics that significantly lower their capacity for political, economic, and social development. These traits include both weak and strong/authoritative governance and administrative capacity, chronic humanitarian crises, persistent social tensions, armed conflict, and civil war. These fragile states would require substantial ongoing outside assistance to overcome these obstacles, or their inhabitants would depend on outside assistance to survive. Efforts to overcome fragility and build resilience, however, must recognize the risk of “premature load bearing” by which external actors through their policies and programs place overwhelming demands on political, social and economic institutions that have (like a bridge), relatively low “load bearing” capacity and themselves can crumble under too much pressure.⁴⁸

Second, fragility is in part a consequence of external efforts at economic reform, statebuilding, conflict prevention, and peacemaking, all of which can have the unintended consequences of fostering or creating institutions that suffer from or exacerbate legitimacy deficits and gaps. These can be economic (through, for example, macro-economic adjustment policies that create winners and losers upsetting fragile economic equilibria), political (through empowering a particular group or groups at the expense of broader inclusivity and accountability), or institutional (through, for example, constitutional mechanisms that solidify group identities and thus make more difficult building broader social and political cohesion). Foreign assistance may help the development of institutions, promotion of social cohesion, and elimination of the underlying causes of conflict. The type of assistance that these fragile states receive can depend on the diplomatic, political, and economic objectives of major powers, the dynamics of bilateral relations, and the orientation of international institutions (such as the IMF). It is not always tailored to the conditions and needs of the state.

Third, a micro-level analysis must recognize that it is challenging to characterize fragile states as single, homogenous entities because some of them are separated into several distinct zones or regions that are governed by different groups or authorities and have their own distinctive governance styles. From the standpoint of development, each fragile state and the entities within it may have varied degrees of capacity to absorb and employ external support (i.e., aid) to improve conditions for their population and pose fewer security, development, or humanitarian challenges regionally and internationally.

These preliminary reflections highlight the importance of establishing a baseline for ongoing policy and analytic discussions, as well as aspirations to redefine what a fragile state is by identifying its many stages (failed, fragile, and resilient), indications for its rating, and progress. However, long-term solutions for states whose development is stagnant call for a more comprehensive and fine-grained study of individual cases, especially considering the unique conditions of each state. In short, because the main causes of fragility are typically political and often outside the purview of development or humanitarian actors and policies, addressing any of the social, economic, security, and political dimensions of state fragility will necessitate more detailed and policy-relevant analysis to inform policy decisions.

Ultimately, the complex issues associated with state fragility can only be tackled via collaboration among security, development, humanitarian, and political players. When it comes to identify the elements that contribute to both successful and unsuccessful measures to deal with the state's fragility, academic and policy literature is abundant. Therefore, it is crucial to create solid links between research and policy implementation so that decision makers can develop and implement effective responses to the regional and global issues arising from fragile states.

Objectives For the GISR's Research and Policy Agenda

The comparative advantage of GISR, particularly its network and location in Qatar, suggests that its policy-relevant research on state fragility can and should take a regional perspective and address five states that are high on the international fragility agenda. These are: Afghanistan, a strong authoritarian state; Lebanon, a weak state; and Syria, Libya, and Yemen, fragmented states with various internal governance structures and many foreign and international stakeholders present in different configurations and roles. What follows will briefly elaborate on the importance and interest of each and some challenges that could be addressed within the GISR.

Afghanistan and Lebanon are two of the Middle East's most fragile states according to the Fragile States Index 2022.⁴⁹ Lebanon's situation is largely due to the escalating economic and political crisis; Afghanistan's is due to the violent transfer of power that has raised vulnerabilities for the population and severely weakened state institutions and public service delivery. The circumstances in Afghanistan and Lebanon, despite being dissimilar in many dimensions, both confront the challenge of managing or regulating the distribution of international assistance. In Afghanistan, the Taliban dominate several regions and have created obstacles to effective international assistance. In Lebanon, the political and economic issues that the government is facing make it difficult for international actors to deliver assistance.

Syria, Libya, and Yemen all face complicated and compromised governance structures with areas under the control of different powers and extensive foreign involvement. Yemen's decline into fragility has somewhat halted (although this may in part be due to large-scale inflows of international assistance), but Syria and Libya, where the situation is in crisis, have seen a minor decline in their fragility trends. The numerous foreign and international entities active in Syria, Libya, and Yemen have fostered fragmented governance systems and models. As a result, they present highly challenging situations for understanding the context of state fragility and the implications for programs and policies to address it. More importantly, various and fragmented or fractured governance systems will likely remain in place within these states for the foreseeable future, which will pose significant challenges to any all-encompassing international strategies to address their development and humanitarian issues.

From a research perspective, it would be important to better understand the governance systems in each of these states, including their potential or actual sources of legitimacy, consent, and authority (including traditional or customary institutions and actors), the shifting nature of their political and socioeconomic elites, different means and techniques for interacting with the population, and the role of the use of force and institutions of organized violence. What can be done to make these forms of governance (regimes and pro/anti regime forces) more legitimate, effective, and robust so that their population and the global community incur less expense in terms of humanitarian aid? What are their strong elements and where are they lacking (institutionally and normatively)? What role does regional actors or intermediate groups

play in these states? Given the likely future needs for humanitarian assistance to mitigate hardship and human suffering, how can the provision of humanitarian assistance be managed in these varied systems of control and governance? What criteria might the major world powers and international organizations impose in these contexts to make their political systems less vulnerable and reduce the need for humanitarian aid?

A careful balance must be struck and an integrated approach adopted between short-term stabilization initiatives and long-term development objectives to promote smooth transitions. This is crucial for international assistance to be effective in the states noted above, and in other fragile states. In the case of Afghanistan, it is crucial to prioritize the needs of the most at-risk groups – girls and women – and to ensure that assistance and support are provided in a way that supports particular situations.

In all of these countries, there are significant trade-offs between security, diplomatic, and development goals; recognizing these will be crucial to efforts to address their fragility, particularly in terms of the welfare of their communities. To address the root causes and consequences of fragility, targeted and context-sensitive studies should assist stakeholders and policymakers in identifying important intervention areas and prioritizing resources. What needs to be done and where should attention be focused? What types of smart aid ideas should be investigated and pursued? GISR research can bridge this gap by carefully evaluating diverse sectors and issues through academic and policy research work, workshops that bring together decision-makers and experts from many professions, and the use of issue-based audiovisual outputs such as podcasts and films.

Policy Relevant Target Audience

Qatar contributes to economic stability, aids those in need in each of these states, and works on several levels to resolve disputes among local and regional powers. Studies could be undertaken to assess the effectiveness of Qatar's efforts to negotiate and bring peace to conflict-affected and fragile states in the region, and in particular to address the aspects of fragility that are most important in any given context or region. Qatar is also well-positioned to offer both financial support and mediation, which improves its standing in relation to the resistance to cooperation of some local elites.

The policy work of this stream of research at GISR can address some following general questions: What could refinements and clarifications of the concept of fragility bring to policy and programing in areas of interest to Qatar and the region?

- ▶ Could it provide more specific guidance to humanitarian actors and operations?
- ▶ Can those who adopt different governance and control models in these fragile states be brought to recognize that adherence to particular rules and practices of international organizations and regional actors can help build resilience and reduce fragility – thus being in their longer-term interest?
- ▶ What shifts in behavior could be expected or demanded for the required assistance and support to address different dimensions of fragility to flow to these countries?
- ▶ What conditions can be mobilized to prevent excessive human suffering and the factors influencing global processes?

These general questions could also be addressed by considering the three requirements for a rethought and more targeted concept of fragility noted at the outset: that it be nuanced and context-specific, be embedded in local perspectives (including those of civil society) on the most important impacts of fragility on a population, and be practically oriented toward shaping policies and programs. Below is a more detailed set of concrete activities that could answer these (and other) questions.

The “Fragility of States” work stream and policy impact work could also focus mostly on Qatar’s aid and policy institutions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatari Development and Aid Organizations, as well as international groups based in Qatar, such as UN organizations that collaborate with the Qatari government). It could situate Qatar’s work in relation to that of other states (great powers) and international organizations that are active in these fragile states, as well as the local actors within these states.

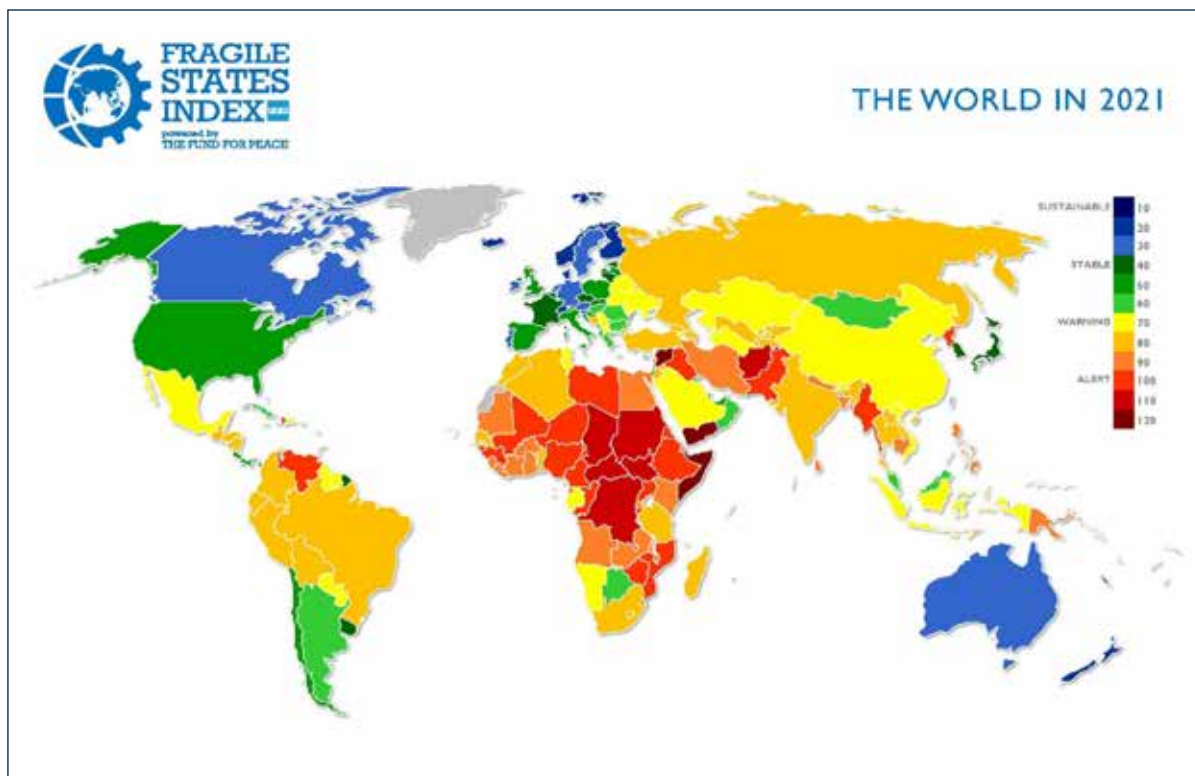
Specific Potential Activities and Outputs

Below is a non-exhaustive list of possible concrete outputs in the fragility work stream:

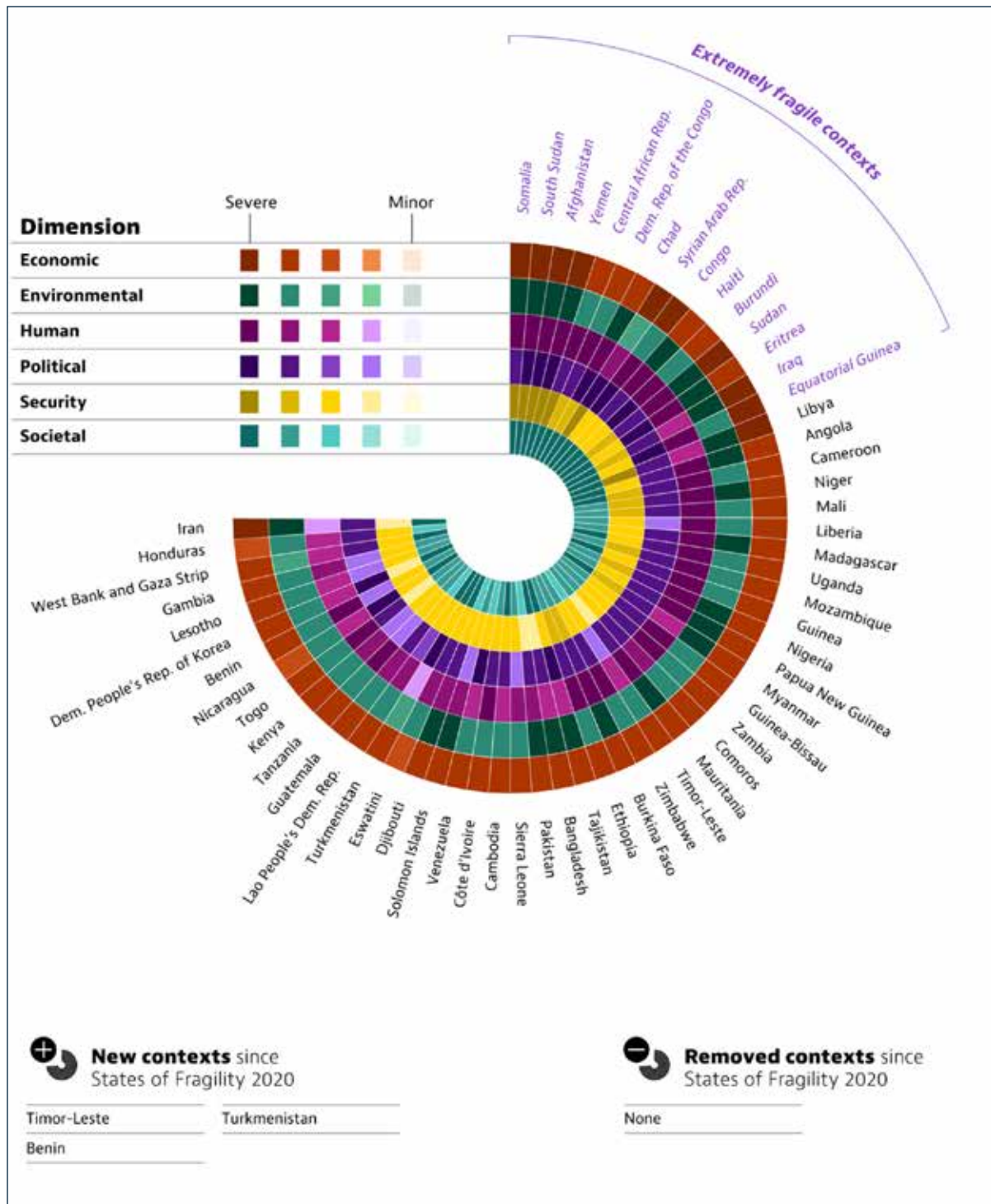
A review of the current academic and policy work (both inside and outside Qatar) should be mapped out. The review can begin with the work undertaken in these countries by the Qatar Foundation entities, along with local partners or stakeholders.

- ▶ Reports on fragile states based on extensive interviews with local political and elite actors, members of civil society, activists, and researchers to understand the different governance and control models of the focus countries. This could include other external actors who work regularly (EU, UN; major other actors) in these countries, and more accessible international NGOs.
- ▶ Produce “white papers”: one on creating a shared blueprint for action among political, security, development, and humanitarian actors; a second on impactful case studies for successful interventions based on even relatively small-scale achievements in these countries that have the potential to be scaled up.
- ▶ Workshops that bring together policymakers, scholars, and local and international actors.
- ▶ An international symposium on fresh and locally oriented strategies for addressing state fragility that draws together macro- and micro-level analyzes of fragility, with an emphasis on fragmented entities.
- ▶ Panels at global conferences (i.e., within the Doha Forum)
- ▶ Press kits and other communication tools; and podcasts and videos for social media dissemination.

Annex I: Fragile States Index 2021



Annex II: OECD States of Fragility 2022



Annex III: OECD States of Fragility

Indicator List

<p>Economic Dimension</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General government gross debt GDP per capita growth rate Regulatory quality Resource dependence Unemployment rate Current account deficit Exchange rate volatility Financial inclusion Tax revenue Women’s employment in the non-agricultural sector <p>Environmental Dimension</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exposure to hazards Air quality Biodiversity and habitat Environment-related displacement Food supply adequacy Lack of adaptive capacity for climate change Non-renewable resource crimes Share of electricity production from renewable sources Water stress Women’s participation in UNFCCC delegations <p>Human Dimension</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to basic water Access to immunization services Adolescent birth rate Age dependency ratio Gender gap in secondary school enrollment Human inequality Prevalence of stunting Primary school completion rate Social protection coverage Youth not in employment, education, or training 	<p>Political Dimension</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevalence of clienteles Perception of corruption Judicial constraints on executive power Legislative constraints on executive power Arrest from online political content Freedom from political killing and torture Restriction on political rights Size of the regime support group Women’s political empowerment <p>Security Dimension</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> State control over the territory Historical deaths from non-state conflicts Attitude toward violence against women Government cybersecurity capacity Historical deaths from war Military spending (as % of GNI) Presence of criminal networks Refugees and IDPs from their country of origin Rule of Law <p>Societal Dimension</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to justice Urbanization rate Exclusion by social group Forced displacement Income inequality Interpersonal trust Media freedoms Participatory environment for CSOs Women’s civil liberties
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Source: <http://www3.compareyourcountry.org/states-of-fragility/countries/AFG>

Endnotes

- 1 See <https://www.oecd.org/fr/cad/conflits-fragilite-resilience/listofstateoffragilityreports.htm> for a list of all OECD reports on fragility since 2005. See also the World Bank (2011). *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development*. Washington, DC: World Bank Group. On the Global Fragility Act (which has been allocated to 1.15 billion US over five years), see <https://www.state.gov/2022-prologue-to-the-united-states-strategy-to-prevent-conflict-and-promote-stability/>
- 2 <https://odi.org/en/insights/fragility-time-for-a-rethink/>; Woodward, S. (2017), *The Ideology of Failed States*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 3 For a recent important example, see the International Monetary Fund (March 2022). IMF Policy Paper: IMF Strategy for Fragile and Conflict-Affected States. Washington: IMF.
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- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid. Lemay-Hébert, N. (2013). “Rethinking Weberian Approaches to Statebuilding.” *Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding*. London: Routledge, pp. 3-14.
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- 11 OECD (2007), *Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations*, Paris: OECD, p. 2. A year later, the OECD modified its definition to “one unable to meet its population’s expectations or manage changes in expectations and capacity through the political process. Whether and to what degree these expectations entail poverty reduction, development, security, or human rights will depend on historical, cultural, and other factors that shape state-society relations in specific contexts.” OECD (2008), “Concepts and Dilemmas of Statebuilding in Fragile Situations: From Fragility to Resilience,” Paris: OECD, p. 16.
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- 14 Fragile States Index (n.d.) ‘Methodology’, available at <https://fragilestatesindex.org/methodology/>
- 15 Gutiérrez Sanin, F. (2011), “Evaluating State Performance: A Critical View of State Failure and Fragility Indexes,” *European Journal of Development Research*, Vol. 23, p. 24.
- 16 Bhuta, N. (2015) “Measuring Stateness, Ranking Political Orders: Indices of State Fragility,” in Cooley, A. and Snyder, J., eds. *Ranking the World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 85-111.
- 17 OECD, *States of Fragility 2022*, Paris: OECD. There are 57 indicators .
- 18 See, for example, the ranking of Afghanistan <http://www3.compareyourcountry.org/states-of-fragility/countries/AFG>
- 19 OECD (2022) ‘The International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF)’, available at <https://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/incaf-network.htm>. The list of publications gives a clear idea of the issues that donors converged around: security, justice, and rule of law, violent conflict and armed violence.
- 20 This also means a concomitant share of development assistance spending. SDC (2022) ‘Action in fragile states: sustainable support for governments and populations’, available at <https://www.eda.admin.ch/deza/en/home/themes-sdc/fragile-contexts-and-prevention/sdc-work-fragile-contexts.html>. For the UK DfID’s list, see <https://devinit.org/blog/does-dfids-new-fragile-states-list-point-toward-a-shift-in-funding-allocation/>. The list was weighted toward the Middle East and North Africa.
- 21 This is “part of WBG commitments made in the context of the 18th replenishment of the International Development Association (IDA) and the Global Capital Increase for the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD).” See “Classification of Fragile and Conflict Situations for World Bank Group Engagement,” (Washington: World Bank, 2022), and <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2023/06/15/supporting-the-most-vulnerable-scaling-up-support-to-address-fragility-conflict-and-violence>
- 22 World Bank, *World Bank Group Strategy for Fragility, Conflict, and Violence 2020-2025* (Washington: World Bank Group, 2020). Available at <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/>

- [documentdetail/844591582815510521/world-bank-group-strategy-for-fragility-conflict-and-violence-2020-2025](#)
- ²³ Hjertholm, P., & White, H. (2000), “Foreign aid in historical perspective,” *Foreign Aid and Development: Lessons Learnt and Directions for the Future*. New York: Routledge, pp. 59-77.
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- ²⁵ g7+, “Note on the Fragility Spectrum,” 2013. Available at <https://www.pbsdialogue.org/en/documents/search/?cat=23>
- ²⁶ Jones, B. G. (2013). “‘Good Governance’ and ‘State Failure’: Genealogies of Imperial Discourse,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26:1, pp. 49-70.
- ²⁷ Desai, H. (2020). “States of Fragility and Official Development Assistance,” Paris: OECD Publishing, p. 61.
- ²⁸ Ferreira, I. A. (2017) “Measuring State Fragility: A Review of the Theoretical Groundings of Existing Approaches,” *Third World Quarterly*, 38(6), 1291-1309.
- ²⁹ Pospisil, J. (2017) “‘Unsharing’ Sovereignty: g7+ and the Politics of International Statebuilding’, *International Affairs* 93:6, pp. 1417-1434.
- ³⁰ g7+, “Note on the Fragility Spectrum,” 2013. Available at: https://www.pbsdialogue.org/media/filer_public/17/43/17434d29-eb70-425b-8367-7ccef13bfbbob/g7fragility_spectrum_2013.pdf. It is not clear, however, how open the g7+ process currently is to the inclusion of new participants.
- ³¹ A fourth caveat is that fragility is a “dispositional” concept. It is a latent quality of something (imagine a cup or a glass), and the consequences of fragility (breakage, breakdown) only emerge under certain conditions that are not at all specified. As a guide to policy, it would be better if the concept of fragility was linked to address specific conditions that would otherwise bring about particular undesirable consequences.
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- ³³ For example, a New York state law working through the legislative process will force commercial creditors to participate on an equal footing in sovereign debt restructuring (rather than holding out for better terms). See ‘Investors brace for new law on sovereign debt workouts,’ *Financial Times*, June 5, 2023.
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- ⁴⁶ Barakat & Larson, p. 30.
- ⁴⁷ Call, C. T. (2011), “Beyond the ‘failed state’: Toward conceptual alternatives.” *European Journal of International relations* 17:2, pp. 303-326. He also notes a third important “gap” – a “security gap.”
- ⁴⁸ Pritchett, F., & de Weijer, F. (2010) “Fragile States: Stuck in a Capability Trap?” *World Development Report 2011 Background Paper*, Harvard Kennedy School.
- ⁴⁹ <https://fragilestatesindex.org/>. Very surprisingly, Lebanon does not appear on the OECD list of the most fragile states.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.



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