

Displaced populations and their effects on regional stability

Joe Landry

A better understanding of state fragility – combined with improvements in policy and funding for displaced populations – is necessary to prevent the proliferation of further regional conflicts.

State fragility, conflict and violence were central themes of the 2011 World Bank *World Development Report*, showing that the connection between the prevention of intra-state conflict and broader international security is becoming ever more accepted.¹ Academics are also paying a great deal of attention to issues such as how to strengthen those states poised on the brink of failure and how to restore the functionality of those that have failed. Empirical studies highlight the fact that conflicts in neighbouring states tend to spread outwards. Less well understood are the dynamic interdependencies found between forced migration and state fragility.

It is a fact that fragile and failed states produce the majority of the world's refugees, asylum seekers and IDPs. They are among the most at-risk people on the planet, and are often subjected to intolerable living conditions, human rights abuses and chronic uncertainty regarding their future well-being. A better understanding of both the causes

and consequences of state fragility is key in preventing such undesirable outcomes. Fragility-ranking indices and research on the causes of civil war are tools that must be promoted and utilised by policymakers, with the understanding that state fragility and state failure are useful concepts insofar as they inform positive, preventative policy decisions and early intervention strategies.

Displaced populations also have an effect on the host countries in which they are forced to reside – usually neighbouring countries – where they can exacerbate resource scarcity, leading to tensions and conflict. It has been demonstrated that one of the primary risk factors for civil war is neighbouring states being engulfed in civil conflict. The Political Instability Task Force (PITF), for example, has narrowed its global instability prediction model to four variables: regime type, infant mortality, state-led discrimination, and neighbouring states in conflict (also termed the 'bad neighbours'

May 2013

variable).² Their findings indicate that states with four or more neighbouring conflicts have a much higher chance of entering conflict themselves. While PITF's measure of 'bad neighbours' is a structural variable that does not change easily over time, other research has illustrated that sudden large influxes of displaced populations can also have a negative effect on state stability. Hosting even ten thousand more refugees in a given year appears to have a significant effect on the chances of conflict erupting.

An increased drain on state resources is one mechanism for this phenomenon. An example of such a situation is Syria, where by 2007 approximately 1.2 million Iraqi refugees were registered. This resulted in massive increases in the prices of everything from basic foodstuffs to house rents. Water and electricity consumption ballooned. Skyrocketing unemployment, crowded schools, overrun hospitals and degradation of basic social service programmes were all symptoms of the influx of refugees. In turn, displeasure spread through both the host country and the refugee populations, leading to rising tensions and outbreaks of violence. Pressure mounted on the Syrian government to quell the various crises but, with few resources and mounting demands on basic services, not much could be done. In retrospect, there is a strong case to be made that the discontent created by this situation contributed to the later explosion of violence in Syria in 2012.

Another mechanism through which state fragility may increase due to neighbouring conflict is through the mass proliferation of small arms and other weapons, possibly along with the spread of radical ideologies. One recent example of such a situation is the 2012 conflict in Mali, which was arguably precipitated by the intervention of NATO forces in Libya, partially as a result of the provision of weapons to rebel fighters including Tuareg people. It is still too early to determine the long-term effects of this crisis on economic and social development in Mali. At the time of writing there are over 200,000 IDPs in Mali and over 200,000

refugees in neighbouring countries. This does not account for unregistered persons, for which there are no accurate estimates. A deeper understanding of the fragile situation in Mali and the impact of conflict in neighbouring Libya might have provided policymakers with practical options to prevent the subsequent rebellion and thus better protect the population of northern Mali.

These examples illustrate the policy implications for both the host country and the international community of humanitarian donors and aid organisations. For the host country, support must be given to incoming refugees, claims must be processed quickly and assistance should be provided in finding gainful employment and somewhere permanent to live. On the part of the international donors and NGOs, funding these positive outcomes is critical. However, long-term sustainable solutions for displaced populations will only be achieved through the exercise of political will and smart, evidence-based decision making. Without these, we will continue to see chain reactions of civil conflicts in fragile states spreading to their neighbours.

The broader message is that the more fragile a state is, the more assistance the authorities need in order to be able to predict and respond to such events through both political and macroeconomic reforms. In addition, global, regional and local conflict early-warning and response systems must incorporate this knowledge into their framework of indicators. Only through developing a more acute understanding of state fragility and its relationship to displacement can we better prevent and respond to crisis events such as those displacing millions of people around the world today.

Joe Landry joseph.landry@carleton.ca is a doctoral student at The Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University, Canada, and Assistant Editor, Canadian Foreign Policy Journal.

1. See article by Yonatan Araya in this issue pp63-5.
2. <http://tinyurl.com/Systemicpeace-GlobalModel>