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In the modern era, many conflicts have arisen in the form of intra-national or civil wars. When determining intra-state conflicts, political scientists have come to use the minimum marker of 1,000 deaths per year in conflict. While often attributed to the post-Cold war period, by applying this measurement one can observe that there have been over 90 civil wars in the decades following the end of the Second World War. No longer dominated by the military predominance of the Cold War powers, the entanglements of the developing world have come to the fore as the principal form of international conflict.

Postcolonial states in the variety of forms that they occur are consistent actors in these conflicts, being more likely to suffer internal violence than states without a colonial past. These states, as a proportion of the international system, differ from the others because their identity and borders were often arbitrarily created by external powers with little or no consideration for pre-existing conditions..

There has been considerable analysis into what has contributed to conflict in postcolonial states, ranging from racial division to infrastructural weaknesses. However a more significant element concerns the issue of identity politics, and it is from this that most if not all more tangible hinderances emerge. This is particularly evident in the civil wars of the African continent, wherein the colonial past has left the present system with an abundance of states, but few nations.

Angola provides a compelling example of this, where independence movements against Portuguese rule were marred by tribal division. The strategic alliance made by the rebel Unita movement with Apartheid South Africa demonstrates well the complexities of sub-national independence movements and the difficulties of postcolonial state management. The political scientist Anthony Smith argues that 'nations [must] be founded upon ethnic cores, if they are to endure' – a foundation that Angola lacked.

But in the years following the 1980s civil war, Angola has experienced an improved stability. Recent USAID analysis of the country posits that despite flare-ups in the rebellious Cabinda region, the country is on a generally progressive path to political stability. Analysts have attributed this improved stability to the government's successful implementation of macroeconomic policies and Chinese credit investment amounting to \$5 billion by 2005. Also attributed to the decline in unrest was the dissolving of Unita's military wing in 2002, and its subsequent commitment to the mainstream political arena.

In 2008 Angola held its first legislative elections in 16 years, a move heralded by international observers. Indeed the country has made important gains in recent years, but it would be unwise to overlook the less positive developments that allowed for this progression. The move by Unita to join the political mainstream was largely one of necessity, having lost its military capabilities as a result of a concentrated effort by the government. The use of aerial bombardment and military operations finally resulted in the death of Unita leader Savimbi in early 2002. This was the turning point that prompted Unita to agree to a ceasefire.

Economics has often been attributed as being both the cause and solution to intra-national wars, with the understanding that improved standards will bring peace. The Angolan civil war would seem to challenge this, as the voluntary entry of Unita into the political mainstream occurred primarily as a result of military defeat. The stability that the Angolan government now enjoys may last if the economy continues to grow and enjoy foreign investment. However it has failed to address the underlying identity issue, which has the potential to resurface violently should the government fail to address its subnational identities.

Equally important in the identity debate is present-day Iraq. Historically, under Ottoman and then British occupation, the country provides a good example of the sub-nationality dilemma and the dangers this can pose to a postcolonial state. The civil war that followed the US-led invasion in 2003 brought to light the country's ethnic and religious divisions. Oppressed and homogenised under Baathist rule, the sectarian violence that erupted following the fall of Baghdad was evidence of the state's postcolonial past. Historically divided down religious and ethnic lines, there are elements within the Sunni, Shi'ite and Kurd minorities that have demonstrated that they are willing to die for a state that is very different from the Iraq that the West sought to liberate.

As we approach the ninth anniversary of the invasion, Iraq's internal conflict endures (albeit with decreasing casualties) in the form of sporadic terrorist attacks. With the end of the US combat mission in Iraq in August 2010, and the removal of all combat, the future of Iraq is now in the hands of its fledgling government. There are fears that the removal of US forces will lead to a renewed intensity in internal conflict, which was in large part kept in check by US troops.

Statistics from the Brookings Institute demonstrate the impact the US surge had following its implementation in 2007 on Iraq civilian deaths, cutting them by as much as three quarters between '07 and '08 – with subsequent reductions over successive years. This will very likely change following the US withdrawal, as despite the military presence the country faces regular attacks, which will most likely only increase. The key to these troubles, while supplemented and fuelled by the state's economic failures (Iraq has hovered at producing only 2 million barrels a day for much of the post-invasion period, although very substantial capital investment is now under way), find their roots in the country's foundational ethnic and religious divisions.

The sectarian violence that still engulfs the capital eight years after President Bush's Mission Accomplished declaration, demonstrates the state's level of instability. Setting aside the no less significant Kurdish movements in the north of the country, it is the religious divisions that pose the greatest danger, threatening to draw in external powers along the Sunni-Shi'ite religious divide – an accusation some already levelled at Iran, and its desire for regional hegemony. In failing to foresee these intrinsic flaws in the very fabric of the Iraqi 'state', the West was unprepared for the 'post liberation' violence that would erupt there.

A criticism often laid against colonialism is that it resulted in unnatural territorial creation. Postcolonial states have the potential to lack social cohesion, should they come into being over divisive ethnic or religious territories. The possibility of this makes them in general more susceptible to the dangers of weak government and a poor economy, which in turn may lead to internal conflict.

The dangers of prolonged subnational movements engaging in violence have been a recurring problem for postcolonial states. This has prompted political scientists (and some state leaders) to return to the drawing board so to speak, regarding state boundaries. The independence movements of the world's many subjugated groups or diaspora represent a significant portion of global internal conflicts.

The concept of territorial division does have historical precedent, most notably in UK (the establishment of an Irish Free State – Eire - while Northern Ireland remained within the UK) and the India-Pakistan separation of 1947. These two subnational groups, which had been suppressed under British rule (and in many cases played off against one another as part of Britain's 'divide and rule' policy), demonstrate an important example of a national incompatibility. The identities of the two cultures, which had indeed been distinct long before British colonial rule, played important roles in the independence movement. The Indian National Congress and Muslim League, under the guidance from the British employed the two state solution.

The brutalities of the division are well known, leaving hundreds of thousands dead and deep scars on either side of the border, as well as unfinished business between West and East Pakistan. The realities of the painful transition, and subsequent wars fought between the two countries over the next five decades, illustrates well the animosity that exists between the two previous sub-nationalities. Spurred in part by colonialism, supplementing far older divisions, the two countries provide important examples of the significance of identity politics. Modern day analysts use the India/Pakistan transition as an example of a relatively successful solution, or at least a far better alternative than internal homogenisation.

However it also illustrates restraint. The creation of a Pashtunistan, or indeed an independent state of Kashmir, were rejected. The move by Mohammad Ali Jinnah of the Muslim Council demonstrates well the importance of political authority and strength in the fulfilling of sub-national claims. This represents a problem for most of the world's subnational groups, who lack the international recognition or military capabilities to realise their independence. What is seen predominantly therefore is civil war and terrorist action, which is often of limited success and most often makes them pariahs at the international level. Potent examples of these in the Western world are the Basque separatists in Northern Spain and the IRA in Northern Ireland.

In the 21st Century, the circumstance of the newly formed Republic of South Sudan might offer an encouraging example of territorial division through political process and international support, rather than military uprising. Making the bold move to oppose the principles of the Organisation of African Unity (which had reaffirmed the borders as made during de-colonisation), the respective Sudanese nations have, like India and Pakistan before them, demonstrated an effort to resolve ethnic and religious division through territorial realignment. Certainly the state is in its infancy and faces future challenges (both nations now claiming the other is fomenting violence on its territory. They are both economically dependant on the oil one produces but the other refines). However, in changing the parameters for how postcolonial states address the issue of sub-national movements, they open the prospect of alternative, peaceful, state development.