



# 2

## The Modern State

South Sudanese parade their new flag shortly before the referendum in January 2011 that granted them independence from neighboring Sudan at the conclusion of a long civil war. The world's newest state fell into civil war in December 2013 when the president accused the vice president, his chief political rival, of trying to overthrow the government. A cease-fire was declared and the vice president returned to the government in April 2016, though tensions remained high. New states are almost always quite fragile, as South Sudan demonstrates.

REUTERS/Benedicte Desrus

## Key Questions

- What are the common characteristics of all modern states, and how do these characteristics give their rulers power?
- In what ways do the characteristics of modern states limit power?
- Why are some states stronger than others? Why do some states fail completely?

**P**olitical development—the origin and development of the modern state—is the starting point for the study of comparative politics. What do we mean by “the modern state”? In everyday language, *state* is often used interchangeably with both *country* and *nation*, but political scientists use the term in a more specific way. *Country*, the most common term in daily discourse, is not used in political science because its meaning is too vague. *Nation*, which we discuss in depth in chapter 4, refers to a group of people who perceive themselves as sharing a sense of belonging and who often have a common language, culture, and set of traditions. *State*, on the other hand, does not refer directly to a group of people or their sense of who they are, though most states are closely related to particular nations. One way to think about the state is to ask how and when we “see” or contact the state. Capitols, courts of law, police headquarters, and social service agencies are all part of the state. If you have attended a public school, gotten a driver’s license, received a traffic ticket, or paid taxes, you’ve come into contact with the state, which provides public goods such as roads and schools, enforces laws, and raises revenue via taxes. These observations lead to a useful, basic definition of the **state** as an ongoing administrative apparatus that develops and administers laws and generates and implements public policies in a specific territory.

The *ongoing* nature of the state sets it apart from both a *regime* and a *government*. Regimes are types of government such as a liberal democracy or fascism (see chapter 3). Americans use *government* and *state* interchangeably, but “governments” are transient. They occupy and utilize the ongoing apparatus of the state temporarily, from one election to the next in a democracy. Americans often refer to governments as *administrations* (e.g., the Trump administration), but the rest of the world uses the word *government* in this context (e.g., the Johnson government of Great Britain).

Modern states have come to be an exceptionally powerful and ubiquitous means of ruling over people. Any number of groups or individuals, such as dictators, elites, or democratically elected politicians, can rule through the state’s institutions. Identifying and understanding the key features of the state help us analyze how governments rule and how much power they have. Looking at how much institutional apparatus a particular country has developed and how effectively that apparatus can be deployed (Are people really paying taxes? Are neighborhoods run by drug lords or the police?) can help identify the effective limits

## Learning Objectives

After reading chapter 2, you should be able to do the following:

- 2.1 Discuss the roles of sovereignty, territory, legitimacy, and bureaucracy in modern states
- 2.2 Detail the historical origins of modern states
- 2.3 Explain the different characteristics of strong, weak, and failed states

**state:** An ongoing administrative apparatus that develops and administers laws and generates and implements public policies in a specific territory

of official rule. States with stronger institutions are stronger states and give their rulers greater power.

In addition to understanding what the state is and how it operates, comparativists study its origins and evolution: Why did modern states become so universal? Where did they first emerge, and why did strong states develop sooner in some places and later or not at all in others? Though they vary widely, all modern states share some basic characteristics that set them apart from earlier forms of political organization.

## Characteristics of the Modern State

Modern states are complex entities with many facets. Some are huge, some are tiny, some are powerful, and some are quite weak. They all share four key characteristics, though, that we can use to identify modern states and distinguish them from other types of political entities: a claim over territory, external and internal sovereignty, a claim to legitimacy, and bureaucracy.

### Territory

The first characteristic of the modern state is so obvious that you might overlook it. A state must have **territory**, an area with clearly defined borders to which it lays claim. In fact, borders are one of the places where the state is “seen” most clearly via the signs that welcome visitors and the immigration officers who enforce border regulations.

The size of modern states varies enormously, from Russia, the geographically largest at 6,520,800 square miles, to the seventeen states with territories of less than 200 square miles each. The differences between vast Russia and tiny Tuvalu are significant, but territories and borders help both claim the status of state.

A glance at any map of the world shows no territories not enclosed by state borders, except Antarctica. Many states have inhabited their present borders for so long that we may think of them as being relatively fixed. In truth, the numbers of states and their borders continue to change frequently. The most recent examples are Kosovo’s independence from Serbia in 2008 and South Sudan’s independence from Sudan in 2011. Border changes and the creation of new states, as both these examples attest, are often attempts to make states coincide more closely with nations, groups with a shared identity that often seek to share a distinct territory and government (that is, a state).

### External and Internal Sovereignty

To have real, effective **external sovereignty**, that is, sovereignty relative to outside powers, a state must be able to defend its territory and not be overly dependent on another power. Governments that lack sovereignty are not truly modern states. Examples include the Japanese-backed and controlled state Manchukuo (Manchuria) from 1932 to 1945, the collaborationist Vichy government in France during World War II, and all colonial states; although they had a local government and clearly defined territory, they were not sovereign states because their most crucial decisions were subject to external authority.

Modern states also strive for **internal sovereignty**—that is, to be the sole authority within a territory capable of making and enforcing laws and policies.

**territory:** An area with clearly defined borders to which a state lays claim

**external sovereignty:** Sovereignty relative to outside powers that is legally recognized in international law

**internal sovereignty:** The sole authority within a territory capable of making and enforcing laws and policies



## IN CONTEXT



## New States and the United Nations

Since 1959, the vast majority of new member states in the United Nations (UN) have been admitted after declaring independence. In the 1960s and 1970s, most newly admitted states were former colonies. In the 1990s, most newly admitted states were the result of the breakup of the Soviet Union and other Eastern-Bloc countries. New UN members continue to be added in the twenty-first century:

- 1945–1959: Eighty-one member states admitted.
- 1960–1969: Forty-two member states admitted.
- 1970–1979: Twenty-five member states admitted.
- 1980–1989: Six member states admitted.
- 1990–1999: Thirty-one member states admitted.

- 2000–2009: Five member states admitted.
- 2010– : One member state admitted.

The example of Kosovo reminds us of another important aspect of territoriality: states exist within an international system of other states (see Table 2.1 on level of state recognition). It is not enough for a state to claim a defined territory; other states must also recognize that claim, even if they dispute a particular border. Political scientists call internationally recognized states sovereign. Essentially, a state achieves **sovereignty** when it is legally recognized by the family of states as the sole legitimate governing authority within its territory and as the legal equal of other states. This legal recognition is the minimal standard for external sovereignty. Legal external sovereignty, which entails being given the same vote in world affairs as all other states, is vital for sovereignty. ●

They must defend their internal sovereignty against domestic groups that challenge it, just as they must defend it externally. Internal challenges typically take the form of a declaration of independence from some part of the state's territory and perhaps even civil war. States rarely are willing to accept such an act of defiance. From the American Civil War in the 1860s to Ukraine in the face of a Russian-supported secession movement, most states use all the means in their power to preserve their sovereignty over their recognized territories.

States try to enforce their sovereignty by claiming, in the words of German sociologist Max Weber, a “monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force” (1970). Put simply, the state claims to be the only entity within its territory that has the right to hold a gun to your head and tell you what to do. Some governments claim a virtually unlimited right to use force when and as they choose. At least in theory, liberal democracies observe strict guidelines under which the use of force is permissible. For example, law enforcement can be called in when a citizen runs a red light or fails to pay taxes but not when she criticizes government policy. All states, though, insist on the right to use force to ensure their internal as well as external sovereignty. As one political philosopher reportedly said in response to students who complained about the university calling in police during a demonstration, “The difference between fascism and democracy is not whether the police are called, but when.”

Sovereignty does not mean, however, that a state is all-powerful. Real internal and external sovereignty vary greatly and depend on many factors. Because the United States is wealthy and controls much territory, its sovereignty results

**sovereignty:** Quality of a state in which it is legally recognized by the family of states as the sole legitimate governing authority within its territory and as the legal equal of other states



TABLE 2.1

### The Shifting Borders of Modern States: Not Recognized, Limited Recognition, and Majority Recognition States

NOT RECOGNIZED		
STATE	DISPUTED SINCE	STATUS
Nagorno-Karabakh	1991	Claimed by Azerbaijan.
Somaliland	1991	Claimed by Somalia.
Transnistria	1990	Claimed by Moldova.
LIMITED RECOGNITION		
STATE	DISPUTED SINCE	STATUS
Abkhazia	2008	Recognized only by 5 countries: Russian Federation, Nicaragua, Nauru, Syria, Venezuela.
Kosovo	2008	Recognized by 113 countries.
South Ossetia	2008	Recognized only by 4 countries: Russian Federation, Nicaragua, Nauru, Venezuela.
Palestine	1988	Recognized as a proposed state by 137 UN member states.
Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)	1983	Recognized only by Turkey.
Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)	1976	Recognized by 84 UN member states.
Republic of China (Taiwan) (ROC)	1949	Recognized by 20 countries.
MAJORITY RECOGNITION		
STATE	DISPUTED SINCE	STATUS
Cyprus	1974	Recognized by all countries except Turkey.
People's Republic of China (PRC)	1949	Not recognized by the Republic of China (Taiwan); the PRC does not accept diplomatic relations with the 19 other UN member states that recognize the ROC.
Israel	1948	Not recognized by 25 countries; no diplomatic relationship with 8 countries.
North Korea	1948	Not recognized by France, South Korea, and Japan.
South Korea	1948	Not recognized by North Korea.

in much greater power than does the sovereignty of Vanuatu, even though both are recognized as legitimate sovereigns over a clear territory. Wealthier states can defend their territories from attack better than poorer and weaker ones, and they can also more effectively ensure that their citizens comply with their laws. Even the United States, though, cannot completely control its borders, as the undocumented immigrants and illegal narcotics crossing its long border with Mexico attest.



**The United States Military and Border Patrol agents secure the United States-Mexico border on November 25, 2018, near San Diego, California after hundreds of migrants tried to breach a border fence from the Mexican city of Tijuana. Migration raises issues of territoriality and external sovereignty, but modern states have also committed themselves to recognizing the human rights of migrants and refugees. Where and how to draw the line in controlling who can enter the country and how has become a hot political debate in the United States as well as Europe.**  
Sandy Huffaker/AFP/Getty Images

## Legitimacy

The ability to enforce sovereignty more fully comes not only from wealth but also from legitimacy. Weber argued that a state claims a “monopoly on the *legitimate* use of physical force” [emphasis added]. **Legitimacy** is the recognized right to rule. This right has at least two sides: the claims that states and others make about why they have a right to rule, and the empirical fact of whether their populations accept or at least tolerate this claimed right. Virtually all modern states argue at length for particular normative bases for their legitimacy, and these claims are the basis for the various kinds of regimes in the world today (a subject explored in chapter 3).

Weber described three types of legitimate authority: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal. **Traditional legitimacy** is the right to rule based on a society’s long-standing patterns and practices. The European “divine right of kings” and the blessing of ancestors over the king in many precolonial African societies are examples of this. **Charismatic legitimacy** is the right to rule based on personal virtue, heroism, sanctity, or other extraordinary characteristics. Wildly popular leaders of revolutions, such as Mao Zedong in his early years in power, have charismatic legitimacy; people recognize their authority to rule because they trust and believe these individuals to be exceptional. **Rational-legal legitimacy** is the right to rule of leaders who are selected according to an accepted set of laws. Leaders who come to power via electoral processes and rule according to a set of laws, such as a constitution, are the chief examples of this. Weber argued that rational-legal legitimacy distinguishes modern rule from its predecessors, but he recognized that in practice most legitimate authority is a combination of the three types. For example, modern democratically elected leaders may achieve office and rule on the basis of rational-legal processes, but a traditional status or personal charisma may help them win elections and may enhance their legitimacy in office.

Legitimacy enhances a state’s sovereignty. Modern states often control an overwhelming amount of coercive power, but its use is expensive and difficult. States cannot

**legitimacy:** The recognized right to rule

**traditional legitimacy:** The right to rule based on a society’s long-standing patterns and practices

**charismatic legitimacy:** The right to rule based on personal virtue, heroism, sanctity, or other extraordinary characteristics

**rational-legal legitimacy:** The right of leaders to rule based on their selection according to an accepted set of laws, standards, or procedures

maintain effective internal sovereignty in a large, modern society solely through the constant use of force. Legitimacy, whatever its basis, enhances sovereignty at a much lower cost. If most citizens obey the government because they believe it has a right to rule, then little force will be necessary to maintain order. This is an example of the third dimension of power we discussed in chapter 1. For this reason, regimes proclaim their legitimacy and spend a great deal of effort trying to convince their citizens of it, especially when their legitimacy is brought into serious question. As Paul Collier (2017) noted, “Where power is seen as legitimate, the cost of citizen compliance with government is reduced. In the absence of legitimacy, three outcomes are possible. In repression, the state incurs the high costs necessary to enforce its decisions on citizens. In conflict, the state attempts this process but is not strong enough to prevent violent opposition. In theater, the state abandons the attempt to impose its will, merely mimicking the actions of a functional government.”

Where modern states overlap with nations, national identity can be a powerful source of legitimacy. This is not always the case, however, and most modern states must find additional ways to cultivate the allegiance of their inhabitants. They usually attempt to gain legitimacy based on some claim of representation or service to their citizens. The relationship between states and citizens is central to modern politics, and chapter 3 addresses it at length. We explore the contentious relationship among states, nations, and other identity groups more fully in chapter 4.

## Bureaucracy

Modern **bureaucracy**, meaning a large set of appointed officials whose function is to implement laws, is the final important characteristic of the state. In contemporary societies, the state plays many complicated roles. It must collect revenue and use it to maintain a military, pave roads, build schools, and provide retirement pensions, all of which require a bureaucracy. Weber saw bureaucracy as a central part of modern, rational-legal legitimacy, since in theory individuals obtain official positions in a modern bureaucracy via a rational-legal process of appointment and are restricted to certain tasks by a set of laws. Like legitimacy, effective bureaucracy strengthens sovereignty. A bureaucracy that efficiently carries out laws, collects taxes, and expends revenues as directed by the central authorities enhances the state’s power. As we discuss further below, weak legitimacy and weak bureaucracy are two key causes of state weakness in the contemporary world.

In summary, the modern state is an ongoing administrative apparatus that develops and administers laws and generates and implements public policies in a specific territory. It has effective external and internal sovereignty, a basis of legitimacy, and a capable bureaucracy. As we argue below, no state has all of these characteristics perfectly; the extent to which particular states have these characteristics determines how strong or weak they are.

## Historical Origins of Modern States

Now that we have clarified what a state is, we need to understand the diverse historical origins of modern states, which greatly influence how strong they are as well as their relationships to their citizens and nations. A world of modern states controlling virtually every square inch of territory and every person on the globe may seem natural today, but it is a fairly recent development. The modern state arose first in Europe between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. The concept spread via conquest, colonialism, and then decolonization, becoming truly universal only with the independence of most African states in the 1960s.

**bureaucracy:** A large set of appointed officials whose function is to implement the laws of the state, as directed by the executive



FIGURE 2.1

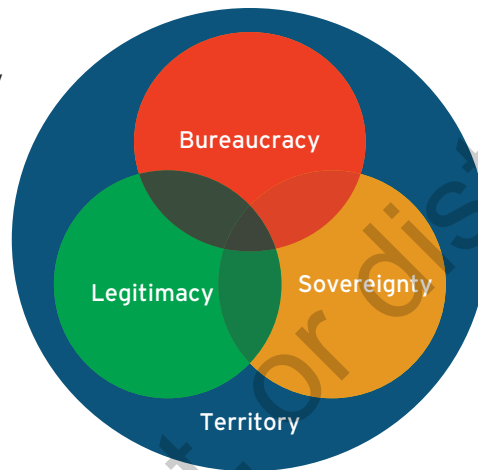
The Anatomy of a State

States

A state is an administrative entity that endures over time, develops laws, creates public policies for its citizens, and implements those policies and laws.

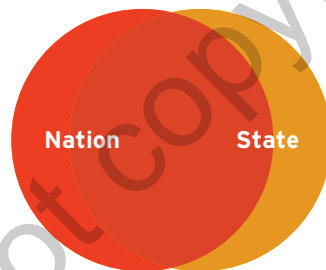
A state must have a legitimate and recognized claim to a defined territory that forms its borders and legitimate and recognized authority to govern within its territory.

It also must have the institutions needed to administer the state's laws and policies.



Nations

Sometimes the people of a nation may identify as belonging to a particular state and thereby enhance the legitimacy of the state.



Some nations strongly overlap with states.

But states may contain one or more nation, or a national movement or a group within a state might contest the state's legitimacy. Some nations exist across a number of state borders or may take up only part of a state.

For instance, the Kurdish people live across the borders of at least five states: Armenia, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria.

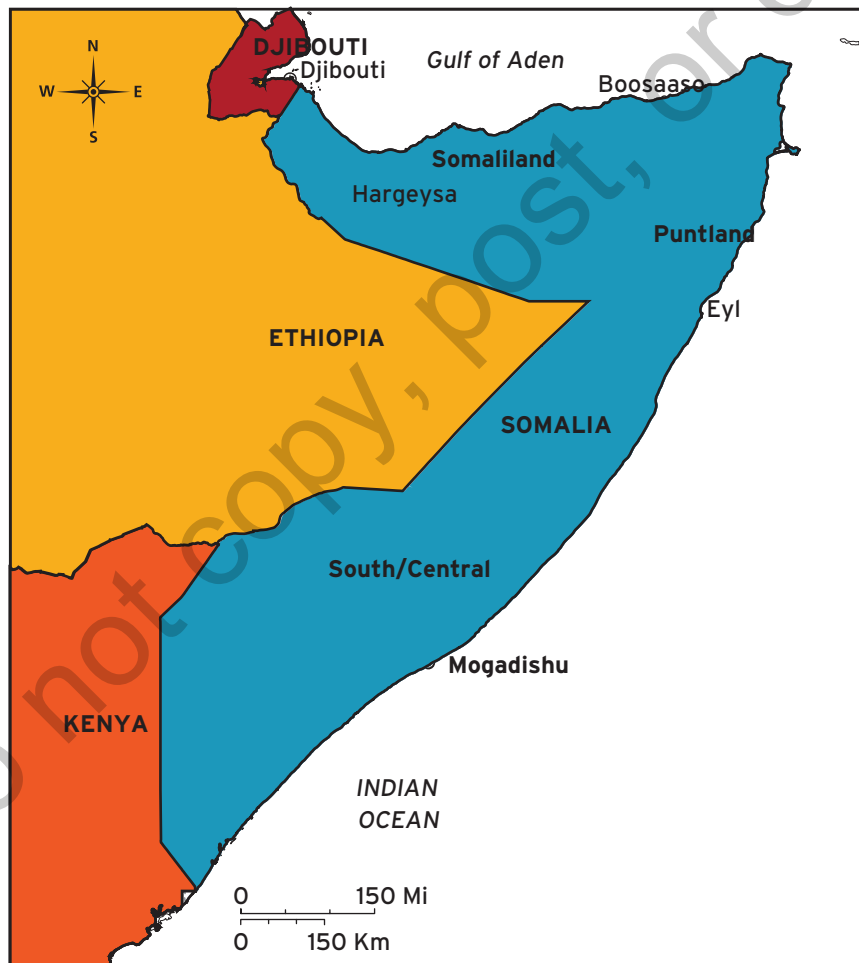
## Somaliland: Internal Versus External Sovereignty

Somaliland is an interesting recent case of disputed sovereignty. It is a state that has achieved almost unquestioned internal sovereignty, a stable (albeit uncertain) constitutional democracy, and a growing economy. No other state recognizes it, however, so it has no international, legal external sovereignty. This unusual outcome is a result of the collapse of the larger state of Somalia and the international efforts to resolve that country's civil war. Somaliland, the northernmost region of Somalia, originally was

a separate colony from the rest of what is now Somalia; it fell under British control while the rest of the country was an Italian colony. In 1960 the former British colony gained independence for a few days but then quickly agreed to become part of the larger state of Somalia, which had also just gained independence.

When Somali dictator Siad Barre was deposed in 1991, the rebel movement in Somaliland declared

MAP 2.1



Source: William Clark, Matt Golder, and Sona Nadenichek Golder, Map 4.1, *Principles of Comparative Politics*, 2e, p. 92.

the region independent within a few months, restoring its colonial borders. A conference of the elders of all the major clans of Somaliland in 1993 produced a new government with a parliament modeled after traditional Somali institutions, with representation based on clan membership. In 2001 a referendum approved a new constitution that was fully democratic, with a bicameral legislature: one house is filled by directly elected representatives and the other by clan elders. The country held successful democratic elections for president, parliament, and local governments in 2005 and 2010. A subsequent presidential election, originally scheduled for 2015, was belatedly but successfully held in fall 2017, although parliamentary elections are now a decade overdue.

Despite growing concerns about its democracy, Somaliland's economy has grown substantially, based mainly on exports of livestock to the Middle East and money sent home by Somalis living and working around the world. The government has established much better social services and greater security than exist in the rest of war-ravaged Somalia. Recently, oil has been discovered in its territory, which could provide much needed

revenue to strengthen the state but could also create what political scientists call a "resource curse" (see p. 47), which would weaken the state by fueling corruption.

Because it has no official recognition from other governments, Somaliland receives very limited foreign aid, has only one embassy in its capital (that of neighboring Ethiopia), and sends no ambassadors abroad. Most of the world fears that officially recognizing Somaliland's external sovereignty will encourage other regions of Somalia to attempt to break away as well, so recognition of the de facto state, expected eventually by many, awaits resolution of the larger civil war in Somalia. Ironically, it looks far more like a modern state than the official government of the larger Somalia, which is internationally recognized as a sovereign state but only partially controls a modest portion of its territory. Indeed, some observers argue that Somaliland's lack of recognition has forced it to create a stronger state than it might have otherwise in order to survive militarily and financially, and the search for international recognition has become a strong basis for a growing sense of nationalism (Richards and Smith 2015). ●

## Modern States in Europe

Prior to approximately 1500, Europe consisted of **feudal states**, which were distinct from modern states in several ways. Most important, they neither claimed nor had undisputed sovereignty. Feudal rule involved multiple and overlapping sovereignties. At the heart of it was the relationship between lord and vassal in which the lord gave a vassal the right to rule a piece of land known as a fief and tax the people living on it, in exchange for political and military loyalty. The system often involved several layers of these relationships, from the highest and most powerful king in a region to the local lord. The loyalty of the peasants—the bulk of the population who had virtually no rights—followed that of their lord. At any given time, all individuals were subject to the sovereignty of not only their immediate lord but also at least one higher lord and often others, and that loyalty could and did change. In addition, the Catholic Church claimed a separate and universal religious sovereignty over all and gave religious legitimacy to the kings and lords who recognized church authority.

By the fifteenth century, feudalism was giving way to **absolutism**, rule by a single monarch who claimed complete, exclusive sovereignty over a territory and its people. Absolutist rulers won battles for power among feudal lords by using superior economic and military resources to vanquish their rivals. Scholars debate the extent to which the absolutist state was a truly modern state, but it certainly introduced a number of the modern state's key elements. Perry Anderson (1974)

**feudal states:** Premodern states in Europe in which power in a territory was divided among multiple and overlapping lords claiming sovereignty

**absolutism:** Rule by a single monarch who claims complete, exclusive power and sovereignty over a territory and its people



argued that the absolutist state included at least rudimentary forms of a standing army and diplomatic service, both of which are crucial for external sovereignty; centralized bureaucracy; systematic taxation; and policies to encourage economic development. It took centuries for these to develop into fully modern forms, however. Legitimacy remained based largely on tradition and heredity, and most people remained subjects with few legal rights. Perhaps of greatest importance, the state was not conceived of as a set of ongoing institutions separate from the monarch. Rather, as Louis XIV of France famously declared, “*L’état, c’est moi*” (The state, it is me).

The competition among absolutist states to preserve external sovereignty reduced their number from about five hundred sovereign entities in Europe in 1500 to around fifty modern states today. The states that survived were those that had developed more effective systems of taxation, more efficient bureaucracies, and stronger militaries. Along the way, political leaders realized that their subjects’ loyalty (legitimacy) was of great benefit, so they began the process of expanding public education and shifting from the use of Latin or French in official circles to the local vernacular so that rulers and ruled could communicate directly, thus adding a new dimension to the rulers’ legitimacy. This long process ultimately helped create modern nations, most of which had emerged by the mid-nineteenth century.

The truly modern state emerged as the state came to be seen as separate from an individual ruler. The state retained its claim to absolute sovereignty, but the powers of individual officials, ultimately including the supreme ruler, were increasingly limited. A political philosophy that came to be known as liberalism, which we discuss in greater depth in chapter 3, provided the theoretical justification and argument for limiting the power of officials to ensure the rights of individuals. The common people were ultimately transformed from subjects into citizens of the state. Bellwether events in this history included the Glorious Revolution in Great Britain in 1688, the French Revolution of 1789, and a series of revolutions that established new democratic republics in 1848.



The relationship between lord and vassal was the heart of the feudal political order. This fifteenth-century work shows peasants paying taxes in the form of money and livestock to their lord. Peasants were born with duties to their lord, and their legal ties to their land gave them no choice but to obey him.

The Granger Collection, NYC

## Premodern States Outside Europe

Outside Europe, a wide variety of premodern states existed, but none took a fully modern form. The Chinese Empire ruled a vast territory for centuries and was perhaps the closest thing to a modern state anywhere in the premodern world (including in Europe). African precolonial kingdoms sometimes ruled large areas as well, but their rule was typically conceived of as extending over people rather than a precisely defined territory, having greater sovereignty closer to the capital and less sovereignty farther away. Virtually all premodern empires included multiple or overlapping layers of sovereignty and did not include a modern sense of citizenship.

## The Export of the Modern State

Europe exported the modern state to the rest of the world through colonial conquest, beginning with the Americas in the sixteenth century. The earliest colonies in the Americas were ruled by European absolutist states that were not fully modern themselves. Over time, European settlers in the colonies began to identify their interests as distinct from the monarch's and to question the legitimacy of rule by distant sovereigns. The first rebellion against colonial rule produced the United States. The second major rebellion came at the hands of black slaves in Haiti in 1793, which led to the first abolition of slavery in the world and to Haitian independence in 1804. By the 1820s and 1830s, most of the settler populations of Central and South America had rebelled as well. As in the United States, the leaders of these rebellions were mostly wealthy, landholding elites. This landed elite often relied on state force to keep peasant and slave labor working on its behalf, so while some early efforts at democracy emerged after independence, most Central and South American states ultimately went through many decades of strongman rule over relatively weak states. Independence nonetheless began the process of developing modern states.

The colonial origins of early modern states in the Americas created distinct challenges from those faced by early European states. European states went through several centuries of developing a sense of national identity. In the Americas, the racial divisions produced by colonization, European settlement, and slavery meant that none of the newly independent states had a widely shared sense of national identity. Where slavery continued to exist, as in the United States, citizenship was restricted to the "free" and therefore primarily white (and exclusively male) population. Where significant Native American populations had survived, as in Peru and Guatemala, they continued to be politically excluded and economically marginalized by the primarily white, landholding elite. This historical context would make the ability of the new states to establish strong national identities difficult and would produce ongoing racial and ethnic problems, explored further in chapter 4.

After most of the American colonies achieved independence, growing economic and military rivalry among Britain, France, and Germany spurred a new round of colonization, first in Asia and then in Africa. This time, far fewer European settlers were involved. The vast majority of the populations of these new colonies remained indigenous; they were ruled over by a thin layer of European officials. Colonizers effectively destroyed the political power of precolonial indigenous states but did not exterminate the population en masse. Challenges to this new wave of colonialism were quick and numerous. The independence of the first-wave colonies and the end of slavery raised questions about European subjugation of African and Asian peoples. Colonization in this context had to be justified as

**A British colonial official arrives with his camel carriage and entourage at an office in the Punjab, India, in 1865. European colonial states in Africa and Asia consisted of a small number of European officials, with military force behind them, ruling over the local population. To rule, they had to rely on local leaders and staff, who collaborated with colonial rule.**

SSPL/Getty Images



bringing “advanced” European civilization and Christianity to “backward” peoples. Education was seen as a key part of this “civilizing” mission. It had a more practical aspect as well: with limited European settlement, colonial rulers needed indigenous subjects to serve in the bureaucracies of the colonial states. These chosen few were educated in colonial languages and customs and became local elites, although European officials remained at the top of the colonial hierarchy and exercised nearly unlimited power. In time, the indigenous elites began to see themselves as equal to the ruling Europeans and chafed at colonial limits on their political position and economic advancement. They became the key leaders of the movements for independence, which finally succeeded after World War II. By the 1960s, modern states covered virtually every square inch of the globe.

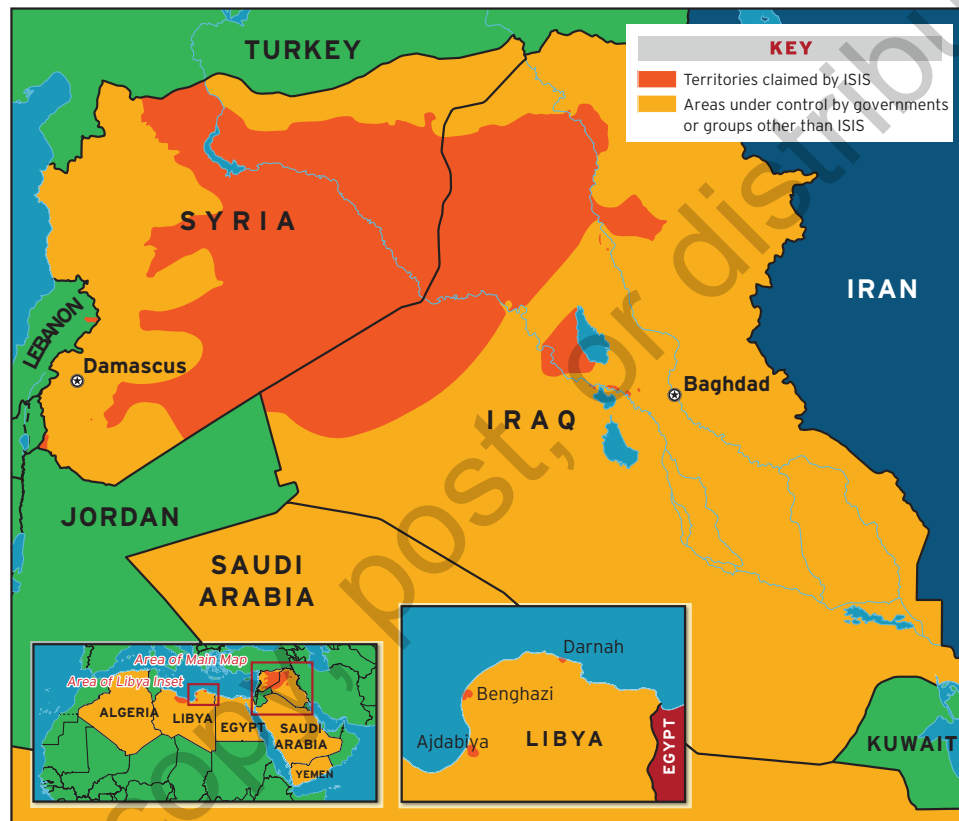
Postcolonial countries faced huge obstacles to consolidating modern states. Although they enjoyed legal external sovereignty and had inherited at least minimal infrastructure from colonial bureaucracies, legitimacy and internal sovereignty remained problematic for most. The colonial powers established borders with little regard for precolonial political boundaries, and political institutions that had no relationship to precolonial norms or institutions. The movements for independence created genuine enthusiasm for the new nations, but the colonizers had previously tried to inhibit a strong sense of national unity, and typically grouped many religious and linguistic groups together under one colonial state. Political loyalty was often divided among numerous groups, including the remnants of precolonial states. Finally, huge disparities in wealth, education, and access to power between the elite and the majority of the population reduced popular support for the state. All of this meant the new states were mostly very weak versions of the modern state.



## Was ISIS a State?

MAP 2.2

### ISIS Territory at Its Height, 2015



On June 29, 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the head of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), declared the creation of a new caliphate, an Islamic state carved by force out of parts of Syria and Iraq. At its height in late 2015, it had effective control over as many as six million people in a territory the size of Belgium, as Map 2.2 shows. By July 2017, it had lost almost all of its territory, including all major cities, militarily defeated by a combination of U.S., Russian, Syrian, Kurdish, and Iraqi forces. Nonetheless, the three-year caliphate that controlled substantial territory raised an interesting question: ISIS is clearly a terrorist organization, but from 2014 to 2017, was it also a state?

Charles Tilly, one of the foremost scholars of the rise of modern states in Europe, famously declared that "war made the state, and the state made war" (1975, 42). War or the threat of war forced leaders of early modern, European states to develop taxation and conscription, which in turn required functioning bureaucracies and some sense of legitimacy. More recently, Rosa Brooks (2015) noted that "[s]tate formation . . . has always been a bloody business." ISIS is infamously brutal, but brutality alone cannot rule it out as a state. So at its height, how did it fare in terms of our core components of statehood: territory, sovereignty, legitimacy, and bureaucracy?

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

The proclamation of the caliphate came after ISIS had gained control over significant amounts of territory in Syria and Iraq. Much of ISIS's territory, however, was only nominally under its control. It actually administered policies in only a handful of significant cities along key roadways, while having loose control and free range of movement over the mostly uninhabited spaces in between. It also had eight affiliates around the world, but only the affiliate in Libya controlled significant territory of its own, which it lost in December 2016.

Within its territory, at least in the key cities, ISIS did exercise internal sovereignty. It was divided into twenty provinces (twelve in Syria and Iraq plus the eight affiliates elsewhere), each with its recognized leadership. In its heartland, it gained revenue via taxing the local population in various ways; a report after ISIS's fall said, "Ledgers, receipt books and monthly budgets describe how the militants monetized every inch of territory they conquered, taxing every bushel of wheat, every liter of sheep's milk and every watermelon sold at markets they controlled" (Callimachi 2018). It also confiscated land from its political and religious enemies to rent to its supporters, both to maintain their support and gain revenue from the rental.

External sovereignty is much less clear. ISIS waged war in both Iraq and Syria and was attacked on multiple fronts. No UN member recognized it and, in fact, ISIS itself was uninterested in such recognition. Its ideology rejects the modern state system, proclaiming that all Muslims should be united in one caliphate under ISIS leadership, a re-creation of the medieval, Islamic caliphate. Like some regimes before it (Nazi Germany comes to mind), it is inherently expansionist. ISIS's failure to recognize the international state system suggests the system's members would never recognize it.

ISIS did, however, establish an extensive, efficient administrative bureaucracy beyond just military and tax collection: "It ran a marriage office that oversaw medical examinations to ensure that couples could have children. It issued birth certificates—printed

on Islamic State stationery—to babies born under the caliphate's black flag. It even ran its own D.M.V." (Callimachi 2018). After it gained control of an area, it demanded that local officials of the Iraqi bureaucracy get back to work, using them to implement new policies but relying on their bureaucratic knowledge to do so. After the caliphate collapsed, those who lived under the brutal regime were glad it was gone, but some noted that ISIS picked up the garbage more efficiently than the Iraqi government had.

ISIS based its legitimacy on its religious claims. The last Islamic caliphate was the Ottoman Empire, dismantled by Western powers at the end of World War I. ISIS's proclamation of the new caliphate inspired thousands of Islamist fighters from around the world to join its ranks. The brutality with which it treated both its external enemies and any of its "citizens" who dared question it or try to flee was justified in the name of establishing the caliphate. Its leader and other ideologues cite Muslim scripture frequently, claiming they were re-creating the original, medieval Muslim government and spurning any connection to modernity. While most of the population under its control shared ISIS's Sunni Muslim tradition, there is no indication they shared its specific ideology or accepted its brutality any more than they would brutality visited on them by any other "state." ISIS has aspects of effective administration of key state tasks, but legitimacy can rarely be based on that alone.

So was the Islamic State really a "state" in political science terms? The answer has to be "only partially." It consciously established and tried to expand aspects of statehood: territorial control and internal sovereignty, a functioning bureaucracy, and a claim to legitimacy. Indeed, its claim to the caliphate—an Islamic form of statehood—is central to its legitimacy and popularity among radical Islamists. While it provided some political goods such as services, security—individual and territorial—is the most universal political good any state must provide, and ISIS failed on that. Its rejection of the international system and its brutality mean it was a state of constant war, lasting only about three years. ●

Nigeria illustrates these trends well. Like most African states, it is literally a product of colonialism: prior to colonial conquest, its territory was home to numerous and varied societies. The northern half was primarily Muslim and ruled by Islamic emirs (religious rulers) based in twelve separate city-states. The southern

half consisted of many societies, the two biggest of which were the Yoruba and Igbo. The Yoruba lived in a series of kingdoms, sometimes politically united and sometimes not, whereas the Igbo were governed only at the most local level by councils of elders; they had no kings or chiefs. The British conquest began around 1870. The colonial state required educated natives to help staff its bureaucracy. In the south, Christianity and Western education expanded rapidly; southerners filled most of the positions in the colonial state. The northern emirs, on the other hand, convinced colonial authorities to keep Christian education out in order to preserve Islam, on which their legitimacy was based. This meant that northerners received far less Western education and therefore fewer positions in the colonial bureaucracy. Because military service required less education, northerners tended to fill the ranks of the colonial (and therefore postcolonial) army.

The educated elite became the leadership of the nationalist movement after World War II. Given the history of divisions in the country, it is no surprise that the nationalist movement was split from the start. The British ultimately negotiated a new government for an independent Nigeria that would be federal, with three regions corresponding to the three major ethnic groups and political parties formed mainly along regional and ethnic lines. As in virtually all African countries, the new government was quite fragile. Nigerians had no prior experience with the British-style electoral democracy they were handed and little reason to believe it would be a superior system for them. In response to fraudulent elections, a section of the army, led primarily by Igbo officers, overthrew the elected government in January 1966 in the first of six military coups. A countercoup six months later brought a new, northern-dominated government to power, but the Igbo military leadership refused to accept it. In January 1967, they declared their region the independent state of Biafra. A three-year civil war ensued that cost the lives of a million people. The central government defeated the separatists in Biafra and reestablished a single state in 1970. Interrupted by only four years of elected rule, the military governed the reunited Nigeria until 1999. Although all military leaders pledged to reduce corruption and improve development, the discovery and expansion of oil production overwhelmed all other economic activity and fueled both corruption and the desire of those in power to stay there. A weak state grew ever weaker and more corrupt.

In 1999 the military finally bowed to popular and international pressure and carried out the country's first free and fair election in twenty years. Democracy has become the basis of legitimacy since then, but that democracy in practice is very imperfect. The state remains one of the weakest and most corrupt in the world.

## Strong, Weak, and Failed States

The modern state as we have defined it is what Weber called an **ideal type**, a model of what the purest version of something might be. Nothing in reality perfectly matches an ideal type; no state indisputably enjoys complete external or internal sovereignty, absolute legitimacy, a monopoly on the use of force, and a completely effective and efficient bureaucracy. Some states, however, are clearly much closer to this ideal than others. States use their sovereignty, territory, legitimacy, and bureaucracy to provide what political scientist Robert Rotberg (2004) called “political goods” to their population. Political goods include security; the rule of law; a functioning legal system; and infrastructure such as roads, public education, and health care. Citizens also expect modern states to pursue economic policies that will enhance their well-being, though exactly what those policies ought

**ideal type:** A model of what the purest version of something might be



to be quite controversial. While some political goods, such as basic security, are universally recognized, others, such as specific economic policies, are the core of many contemporary political debates around the world, which we will investigate in subsequent chapters.

A **strong state** is generally capable of providing political goods to its citizens, while a **weak state** can only do so partially. State strength, however, exists on a continuum, with no state being perfectly strong in all conceivable categories. Changes in state strength can also go in both directions. Francis Fukuyama (2014), for instance, argues that the U.S. state has weakened in the last several decades due mainly to what he calls “gift exchange” between legislators, lobbyists, and campaign donors that weakens the state’s ability to make independent decisions based on some sense of the public interest. As Table 2.2 shows, stronger states tend to be wealthier and consume a larger share of economic resources; they are simply economically bigger than weak states. They also are less corrupt, indicating the presence of stronger bureaucracies, and tend to be more legitimate. Weak states, on the other hand, are often characterized by what Thomas Risse (2015) termed “limited statehood”: they provide some political goods widely but others only in certain areas of the country. Other actors—local strongmen, religious institutions,

**strong state:** A state that is generally capable of providing political goods to its citizens

**weak state:** A state that only partially provides political goods to its citizen

TABLE 2.2

## The Modern State

COUNTRY	APPROXIMATE YEAR MODERN STATE ESTABLISHED	FRAGILE STATES INDEX, 2019		GDP PER CAPITA (PPP)	GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURE AS % OF GDP	CORRUPTION PERCEPTION INDEX, 2018 (0 = HIGHLY CORRUPT, 100 = HIGHLY CLEAN)	LEGITIMACY (0 = LEAST LEGITIMATE, 10 = MOST LEGITIMATE)
		RANK AMONG 178 COUNTRIES (1 = MOST FRAGILE, 178 = LEAST FRAGILE)	SCORE (12 = LOWEST RISK OF STATE FAILURE, 120 = HIGHEST RISK OF STATE FAILURE)				
Brazil	1889	83	71.8	\$15,600	38.6%	35	4.68
China	1949	88	71.1	\$16,700	31.6%	39	5.36
Germany	1871	167	24.7	\$50,800	43.9%	80	5.84
India	1947	74	74.4	\$7,200	27.5%	41	5.21
Iran	1925	52	83	\$20,100	18.5%	28	2.04
Japan	1867	157	34.3	\$42,900	38.7%	73	6.13
Mexico	1924	98	69.7	\$19,900	26.9%	28	3.50
Nigeria	1960	14	98.5	\$5,900	10.8%	27	data unavailable
Russia	1917	73	74.7	\$27,900	35.4%	28	3.18
United Kingdom	1707	155	36.7	\$44,300	41.6%	80	6.21
United States	1787	153	38	\$59,800	37.8%	71	5.83

Sources: Fragile state data are from the Fund for Peace, 2019. Data on GDP per capita are from the *CIA World Factbook* (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/index.html>). Data on government expenditure as percentage of GDP are from the Heritage Foundation’s 2019 Index of Economic Freedom (<http://www.heritage.org/index/ranking>). Data on corruption are from Transparency International, 2015. Data on state legitimacy are from Bruce Gilley, “State Legitimacy: An Updated Dataset for 52 Countries,” *European Journal of Political Research* 51 (2012): 693–699 (doi:10.1111/j.1475-6765.2012.02059.x).

or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—may substitute for a weak state in some regions, providing political goods the state cannot or will not.

A state that is so weak that it loses sovereignty over part or all of its territory is a **failed state**. Failed states make headlines—for example, Syria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, and Afghanistan. Syria collapsed into civil war in 2011, though by 2019 the incumbent ruler had mostly reestablished sovereign control of the state’s territory, suggesting that a (probably still weak) Syrian state would re-emerge.

Virtually all elements of state strength are interconnected. If a state lacks the resources to provide basic infrastructure and security, its legitimacy most likely will decline. Lack of resources also may mean civil servants are paid very little, which may lead to corruption and an even further decline in the quality of state services. Corruption in some bureaucracies, such as the military and border patrol, can cause a loss of security and territorial integrity. If the state cannot provide basic services, such as education, citizens will likely find alternative routes to success that may well involve illegal activity (e.g., smuggling), undermining sovereignty that much further. If the state does not apply the rule of law impartially, citizens will turn to private means to settle their disputes (mafias are a prime example of this phenomenon), threatening the state’s monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Continuing patterns of lawless behavior create and reinforce the public perception that the state is weak, so weak states can become caught in a vicious cycle that is difficult to break.

Mexico demonstrates some of these problems, even though it is a middle-income country with a state far stronger than the weakest ones. Although it gained independence in 1821, a modern state was not really established until a century later, after a revolution brought the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI) to power. It established an electoral-authoritarian regime and maintained power through systemic corruption, bribery, and intimidation. It did, however, create a functioning state that, though corrupt, made important strides in furthering literacy, access to health care, and overall

**failed state:** A state that is so weak that it loses effective sovereignty over part or all of its territory



**Failed states make headlines around the world and have implications far beyond their borders. In Raqa, the former capital of the Islamic State in Syria, a girl walks through the rubble in 2019, two years after Kurdish-led forces overran the city, taking it back from a regime residents described as brutal. The Syrian civil war gave ISIS the opportunity to create a proto-state within its and Iraq’s territory, and it produced a massive refugee crisis that has had profound effects in the European Union.**  
DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP/Getty Images

economic development. It also used oil wealth and trade with the United States to achieve significant industrialization, transforming Mexico into a middle-income country, though with sharp income and regional inequality. All of this expanded the size, scope, and capability of Mexico's state.

After seventy years in power, the PRI was forced to allow real electoral competition, and in 2000, when the PRI lost the presidential election, the country became a democracy. Despite its democratization, questions over the strength of the state continue. The most critical challenge is a war among rival drug cartels that has killed an estimated 75,000 to 100,000 people in the last decade. Endemic police corruption, lack of alternative economic opportunities, and a supply of small arms from north of the border have all led to the degradation of government authority in the northern region. Various governments have alternated between military-type crackdowns that killed hundreds of people and negotiations with drug cartels to rein in the violence, none of which has worked fully. Drug cartels often bribe local officials to gain their acquiescence, undermining the state's attempts to regain control, most famously when the biggest drug kingpin escaped from prison via an elaborate tunnel dug with the obvious collaboration of prison officials. This has called into question the state's ability to keep a monopoly on the legitimate use of force for the first time since the end of the Mexican Revolution.

Why some states are strong while others are weak has long been a major question in the study of political development. Economists Douglass North and John Wallis and political scientist Barry Weingast used a rational choice institutionalist argument to address this question (2009). They argued that the earliest states were based on elite coalitions created to limit violence among themselves. Power remained very personal, as the earliest states were really just temporary agreements among competing elites, each of whom had control over the means of violence. Elites abided by these agreements in order to gain economic advantages from the absence of warfare and the ability to extract resources. Eventually, some elites negotiated agreements that recognized impersonal organizations and institutions that were separate from the individual leaders. As these developed and functioned credibly, greater specialization was possible, and distinct elites who controlled military, political, economic, and religious power emerged. This required the rule of law among elites. Together with ongoing, impersonal organizations, the rule of law allowed the possibility of a true monopoly over the use of force as individual elites gave up their control of military power. Once established among elites, such impersonal institutions and organizations could expand eventually to the rest of society.

Fukuyama (2014) argued that the continuation of this story—the development of modern states in nineteenth-century Europe—took several different paths. Some, like Prussia (which became Germany), first developed a strong bureaucracy and military in the face of external military threat and only later developed the rule of law and democratic control over the state. Others, such as the United States, saw the rule of law and relatively widespread democratic accountability develop first, resulting in political parties that became corrupt “machine politics”; a modern bureaucracy arose only after industrialization produced a middle class and business interests that demanded reforms to create a more effective government. Following Samuel Huntington (1968), Fukuyama argued that states such as Italy and Greece, which did not develop as strong states early enough, faced the problem of a politically mobilized populace without adequate economic opportunity. This led to corruption as political leaders used the state's resources to provide for their political followers rather than creating a bureaucracy based on merit and equity.

Comparativists have developed several other arguments to explain why states are weak. A common one for non-European countries is the effects of colonialism.

In most of Africa and Asia, postcolonial states were created not by negotiations among local elites but between them and the departing colonial power, and political institutions were hastily copied from the departing colonizers; the kind of elite accommodation to which North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) pointed did not occur. Not having participated seriously in the creation of the new institutions, elites often did not see themselves as benefiting from them and therefore changed or ignored them. In Africa, postcolonial rulers, lacking functioning impersonal institutions, maintained power by distributing the state's revenue to their supporters and therefore created authoritarian regimes to narrow the number of claimants on those resources. Economic decline beginning in the late 1970s and pressure for democratization a decade later meant those leaders had to try to extract more and more resources from their citizens, leading to a period of widespread state failure and civil war in the 1990s (Bates 2008). In Latin America, the weakest states developed where the earliest Spanish conquest occurred—around the capitals of precolonial kingdoms such as in Mexico and Peru. Stronger states emerged at locations of less population density and therefore greater European settlement and later colonization, whether Spanish (Argentina) or British (the United States and Canada) (Kelly and Mahoney 2015).

Others have looked to the nature of the economy or the modern international system to explain state weakness. Wealth certainly plays a role: states need resources to provide political goods. The type of economic activity within a state, however, may make a significant difference. Countries with tremendous mineral wealth, such as oil or diamonds, face a situation known as the **resource curse**. A government that can gain enough revenue from mineral extraction alone does not need to worry about the strength of the rest of the economy or the well-being of the rest of the population. If the asset exists in one particular area, such as the site of a key mine, the government simply has to control that area and export the resources to gain revenue in order to survive. Rebel groups likewise recognize that if they can overpower the government, they can seize the country's mineral wealth, a clear incentive to start a war rather than strive for a compromise with those in power. Once again, in this situation, elite compromise to create stronger institutions seems unlikely. The resource curse is not inevitable. In countries that already have relatively strong states, like Norway when it discovered oil in the North Sea, abundant resources may simply provide greater wealth and strengthen the state further, but in weak states, greater wealth may do little to strengthen the state and even weaken it, given the incentives it provides to various political actors.

The neighboring states of Sierra Leone and Liberia in West Africa are a classic case of the worst effects of the resource curse. Ironically, both countries began as beacons of hope. Britain founded Sierra Leone to provide a refuge for liberated slaves captured from slaving vessels, and the United States founded Liberia as a home for former American slaves. Descendants of these slaves became the ruling elite in both countries. Both countries, however, also became heavily dependent on key natural resources. The bulk of government revenue came from diamond mining in Sierra Leone and from iron-mining and rubber plantations owned by the Firestone Tire Company in Liberia. The ruling elites kept firm control of these resources until rebellion began with a military coup in Liberia in 1980. The new regime was just as brutal and corrupt as its predecessor, leading to a guerrilla war led by the man who became West Africa's most notorious warlord: Charles Taylor. After taking control of a good portion of Liberia, Taylor helped finance a guerrilla uprising in neighboring Sierra Leone. Once the guerrilla forces gained control of Sierra Leone's lucrative diamond mines, Taylor

**resource curse:** Occurs when a state relies on a key resource for almost all of its revenue, allowing it to ignore its citizens and resulting in a weak state



smuggled the diamonds onto the international market to finance the rebellions in both countries. The wars were not fully resolved until 2003, when international sanctions against West African diamonds finally reduced Taylor's cash flow and forced him out of power. Both countries are now at peace and have fragile, elected governments, but they still rely too heavily on key natural resources, so the resource curse could cause further problems.

The contemporary international legal system, like resources, can prolong the life of otherwise weak states. Prior to the twentieth century, the weakest states simply didn't last very long; they faced invasions from stronger rivals and disappeared from the map. The twentieth-century international system fundamentally changed this

### CRITICAL INQUIRY

## Measuring State Strength

In response to growing international concern about state failure, the Fund for Peace (2019) developed a Fragile States Index to highlight countries of imminent concern. In 2019, the twelfth annual index ranked 178 countries on twelve factors in four categories considered essential to state strength:

- Social indicators
  - demographic pressures,
  - refugees or internally displaced persons and intervention of external political actors,
  - vengeance-seeking group grievance, and
  - sustained human flight
- Economic indicators
  - uneven economic growth and
  - poverty/severe economic decline;
- Political indicators
  - legitimacy,
  - deterioration of public services,
  - rule of law/human rights abuses;
- Cohesion indicators
  - security apparatus, and
  - factionalized elites and vengeance-seeking group grievance.

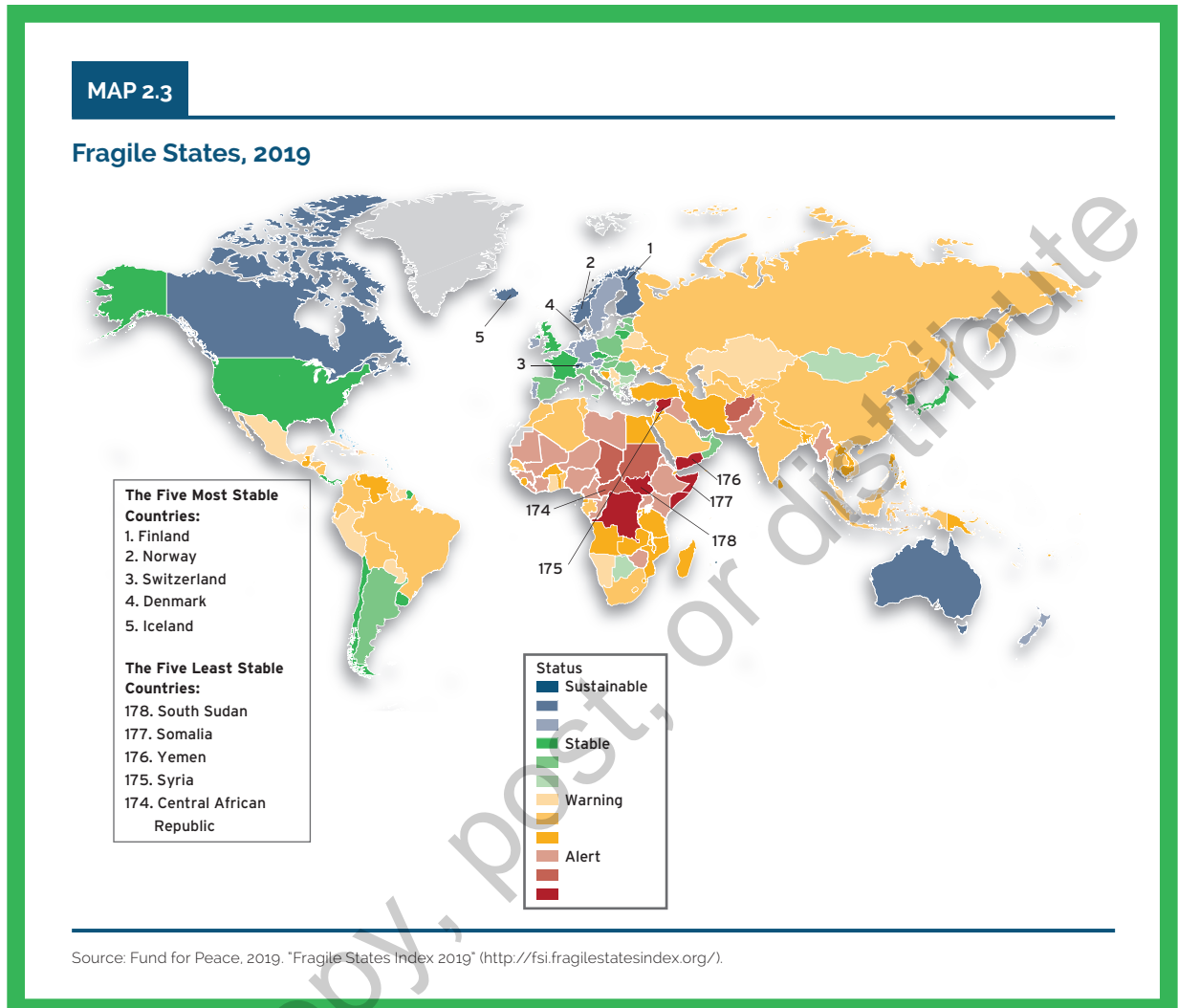
Map 2.3 shows the least and most stable countries.

We can use the Fragile States Index to ask a couple of interesting questions. First, what kind of argument can we make about why states are weak or stable based on the index? Look at which countries are most threatened, most sustainable,

and in between on the index. Based on what you know about the countries (and it never hurts to do a little research to learn more!), what hypotheses can you generate about why states are weak or strong? Do some of these relate to the arguments we outlined above about why states are weak or strong? Can you come up with other arguments that we haven't discussed in this chapter? If so, on what kinds of theories (from chapter 1) are your hypotheses based?

A second interesting question is, How can we really measure state strength? Take a look at the indicators page of the index: <https://fragilestatesindex.org/indicators/>. The index measures those twelve indicators and then adds them up, weighting them all equally, to arrive at an overall score for each country. Do the indicators each measure an important element of state strength? Is it feasible to think we can measure the indicators and arrive at a number to represent each of them in each country? Does it make sense to weight all the indicators equally, or are some more important than others? If you think some are more important, which ones and why? Does your answer connect to any of the theories of state strength and weakness we discussed earlier?

Comparativists don't all agree on the answers to these questions, but we look at evidence and try to generate testable hypotheses for state strength, weakness, and failure in an effort to help states develop stronger institutions. We do this because the human consequences of state weakness—civil conflict, refugees, and human rights violations—and the consequences for the international system are severe. ●



dynamic, establishing the norm that the hostile takeover of other states was unacceptable. Exceptions notwithstanding, outright invasion and conquest have become rare, so weak states are more likely to survive. The result can be what Robert Jackson (1990) called **quasi-states**: states that have legal sovereignty and international recognition but lack most domestic attributes of a modern state. Jackson argued that many postcolonial states, especially in Africa, are quasi-states. Ruling elites in these states often come to rely on external resources, including foreign aid, for their survival. Once again, they have little reason to compromise with their domestic rivals, and their rivals, being cut out of all benefits, often take up arms. During the Cold War, the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union led each of the superpowers to back dictators who would support their respective sides in global politics. Both sides provided generous aid to dictators who ruled with little interest in providing political goods to their people. Many of these states failed a few years after the end of the Cold War because the elimination of the U.S.-Soviet global rivalry meant that neither side was interested in continuing to support the dictators.

In the post-Cold War era, the international system and major powers have come to see weak and failed states as a significant problem. Weak states produce corruption

**quasi-states:** States that have legal sovereignty and international recognition but lack almost all the domestic attributes of a functioning state

and illegal activity. They have porous borders through which illegal arms, contagious diseases, terrorists, and illegal drugs might pass. They undermine economic growth and political stability, and democracy is difficult or impossible to foster when a state is unable to provide at least the basic political goods citizens expect. For all these reasons, “state-building” (or “nation-building”—the terms are often used interchangeably, even though comparativists draw a sharp distinction between a state and a nation) has become a common element of the international political system. Wealthy countries and international organizations, including the UN, implement programs to try to rebuild states after conflicts. They try to build or rebuild political institutions, train bureaucrats in proper procedures, hold democratic elections, and restore basic services. Much of the comparative research outlined above suggests that state-building is a very long and complicated process, while official state-building programs often focus on a five- to ten-year program and only certain elements of the state.

The United States and its allies faced these issues as they attempted to extricate themselves militarily from Afghanistan in 2019. While Afghanistan has held several elections, it remains an extremely weak state, dependent on external military support as well as internal support from former warlords who continue to command the personal loyalty of their security forces, some within the national army. The Taliban, against whom the government and external allies have been fighting since 2001, continue to control significant resources, including much of the lucrative poppy trade (poppies are used to make heroin). The United States and Taliban attempted to negotiate an end to the war in 2019, but even if that were to succeed, it is far from clear that a viable Afghan state would emerge. Not just the Taliban but internal divisions among key, armed leaders from various regions could result in a very weak state or, worse, a renewed war.

## Conclusion

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The modern state is a political form that has been singularly successful. Its characteristics—territory, sovereignty, legitimacy, and bureaucracy—combine to produce an exceptionally powerful ruling apparatus. Arising nearly five hundred years ago, it has spread to every corner of the globe. In fact, the modern world demands that we all live in states. Although state strength can be used to oppress the citizenry, many political scientists argue that long-term strength must come from legitimacy and the effective provision of political goods. In strong states, rulers command military force to prevent foreign attack and domestic rebellion, and they control a set of state organizations that can effectively influence society in myriad ways. When this all works well, it can give ruling elites legitimacy and therefore greater power. Weak states, on the other hand, lack the capacity and often the will to provide political goods. This threatens their legitimacy and often leaves them dependent on international support or key resources for their survival. While they may appear strong because they use a great deal of force against their own people, this is in fact often a sign of weakness: they have no other means of maintaining their rule. The weakest states are prone to collapse; they become failed states, as violent opponents can challenge the state’s monopoly on the use of force with relative ease.

This raises a long-standing question: How can weak states become stronger? The answer usually involves the creation of impersonal institutions and the rule of law. This can lead citizens to trust the state, giving it greater legitimacy and strength that it can use to provide political goods. The strongest modern states are virtually all democracies, which are based on such notions as treating all citizens equally and limiting what the state can do, though electoral democracy certainly is no guarantee of state strength.

The strongest states in Europe and elsewhere resulted from centuries of evolution in most cases, as ruling elites ultimately compromised to create more impersonal and powerful institutions that would allow greater economic growth and protect them from attack. These states often began their modern era with strength in one or two particular areas, such as the bureaucracy and military, and developed strength in other areas decades or even centuries later. Postcolonial states had very different historical origins, based on colonial conquest rather than agreements among domestic elites. With independence, these states took the modern form but not necessarily all of the modern content. They often lacked a strong sense of national unity based on a shared history. The international system, however, demands that they act like states, at least internationally. Their rulers therefore act accordingly, often gaining significant power in the process, even in relatively weak states. Lack of wealth, or wealth in the form of a resource curse, also produces very weak states, often in combination with a problematic colonial legacy.

Political scientists have used various theoretical approaches to understand the modern state. Both Marxist and political culture theorists have long made arguments about how and why states develop. Marxists see them as reflecting the power of the ruling class of a particular epoch. Under capitalism, that ruling class is the bourgeoisie, and the liberal state in particular represents the bourgeoisie's interests. In postcolonial countries, weaker states reflect the weak, dependent nature of the ruling elite there. Cultural theorists argue that underlying values, in particular a strong sense of nationalism, are crucial to maintaining a strong state, which must be based on some shared sense of legitimacy. Without this, effective sovereignty will always be limited.

In recent years, rational choice and institutionalist theories have become more prominent. The modern state, these theorists argue, emerged in response to the rational incentives of the emerging international state system, rewarding rulers who developed effective sovereignty, military force, and taxation. Once established, strong state institutions tend to reinforce themselves as long as they continue to function for the benefit of the elites for whom they were created to serve and provide adequate political goods to the citizenry. Weaker states develop where colonial rule did not provide the same set of incentives, and variation in colonial rule often led to variation in postcolonial state strength. As modern states demand more from citizens, they develop a rational interest in establishing some type of popular legitimacy, a subject we look at in much greater depth in the next chapter. ●

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## KEY CONCEPTS

**absolutism** (p. 37)

**bureaucracy** (p. 34)

**charismatic legitimacy**  
(p. 33)

**external sovereignty**  
(p. 30)

**failed state** (p. 45)

**feudal states** (p. 37)

**ideal type** (p. 43)

**internal sovereignty**  
(p. 30)

**legitimacy** (p. 33)

**quasi-states** (p. 49)

**rational-legal legitimacy**  
(p. 33)

**resource curse** (p. 47)

**sovereignty** (p. 31)

**state** (p. 29)

**strong state** (p. 44)

**territory** (p. 30)

**traditional legitimacy**  
(p. 33)

**weak state** (p. 44)



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## WEB RESOURCES

### **Brookings Institution Index of State Weakness in the Developing World**

(<https://www.brookings.edu/research/index-of-state-weakness-in-the-developing-world/>)

### **Comparative Constitutions Project**

(<http://comparativeconstitutionsproject.org>)

### **The Fund for Peace, Fragile States Index 2016**

(<fsi.fundforpeace.org>)

### **The Heritage Foundation, Index of Economic Freedom**

(<http://www.heritage.org/index/ranking>)

### **International Crisis Group**

(<http://www.crisisgroup.org>)

### **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Better Life Index**

(<http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org>)

### **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Country Statistical Profiles**

([http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/country-statistical-profiles-key-tables-from-oecd\\_20752288](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/country-statistical-profiles-key-tables-from-oecd_20752288))

### **Transformation Index BTI**

(<http://www.bti-project.org/home>)

### **Transparency International, Corruption Perception Index**

([http://www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi))

### **United Nations**

(<http://www.un.org/en>)

### **The World Bank, Worldwide Governance Indicators**

(<http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#home>)