

# **Towards A Nuanced Understanding of Failed States**

Written by Ahmed Khaled Rashid and Elayna Hamashuk

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## **Towards A Nuanced Understanding of Failed States**

<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/03/06/towards-a-nuanced-understanding-of-failed-states/>

AHMED KHALED RASHID AND ELAYNA HAMASHUK, MAR 6 2012

### **Introduction**

In a globalizing world, our understanding of the dynamics of state failure is of critical importance. The events that unfold in a failing or failed state have implications not only for the state's own citizens, but also for neighboring states as well as for the global political sphere. In the last decades, there has been an increase in the number of states that have undergone the process of failure and quite understandably the international affairs discourse has been dominated by the issues vis-à-vis the failed states.

State failure denotes a range of observable characteristics that qualify a country to be deemed a failed or failing. On one hand, in the popular literature, state failure is often associated with countries like Afghanistan, Sudan or Somalia – typically countries which have undergone intense political turmoil, civil strife and collapse of the central government structures. On the other hand, authors like Noam Chomsky offer a broader and more radical conceptualization of failed states. He asserts that if we were to define failed states as the ones who fail 'to provide security for the population, to guarantee rights at home or abroad, or to maintain functioning (not merely formal) democratic institutions', then the United States is the world's biggest failed state (Chomsky, 2006).

This may sound like a hyperbolic charge, but offers an interesting departure point to initiate our discussion. To be sure, there is certainly a need for better understanding and more apt application (and appreciation) of these terminologies and their underlying factors and processes. Neither the pattern of state failure nor the efforts to rebuild the state are linear processes. This paper tries to delve into the dynamics of failed states from a slightly different angle, perhaps outside of a normative paradigm. The analysis uses the example of Somalia, which has been widely regarded as a failed state.

More specifically, this paper assesses the process of state failure in Somalia. It reviews the roots of state collapse in the country, considers a model for understanding failed states, and offers a basis for the discussion of the implications of this model. It makes the following arguments. First, scholars have been guilty of simplifying state failure to a result of bad leadership and ethnic/communal grievances. Second, in the case of Somalia, state failure and governance without government stems from a system of neo-patrimonial politics and is shaped by numerous Somali actors. Third, this model for understanding state failure has implications for shaping intervention and state building policy and ought to be considered by the relevant actors in the international community.

### **Understanding State Failure**

While acknowledging the divergent views on definitions and characterizations of failed states, we still need to establish a basic conceptualization. Failed states were initially understood through a humanitarian prism of economic anarchy and famine in the absence of a centralized government, a phenomenon concerning mainly non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Western liberals (Verhoeven, 2009). Yet, the analysis of failed states denotes a political account of who has failed, who has not failed, why failure occurs and which dynamics sustain it, of what reality on the ground looks like in collapsed states, and of how the international community should react to state failure. To be sure, we rely on a set of empirical and theoretical approaches to characterize state failure.

# Towards A Nuanced Understanding of Failed States

Written by Ahmed Khaled Rashid and Elayna Hamashuk

A state that is failing has several attributes, one of the most common being the loss of physical control of its territory or a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Other attributes of state failure include the erosion of legitimate authority to make collective decisions, an inability to provide reasonable public services, and the inability to interact with other states as a full member of the international community.

There is often an inclination to identify a “poorly performing” state as a “failed” state. However, “failed state” denotes a specific set of conditions and dynamics. The Crisis States Research Centre defines a “failed state” as a condition of “state collapse” – i.e., a state that can no longer perform its basic security and development functions and that has no effective control over its territory and borders. An important distinction between a failed state and a poorly performing state is that unlike a poorly performing state, a failed state can no longer reproduce the conditions for its own existence. The opposite of a “failed state” is an “enduring state” and the absolute dividing line between these two conditions is difficult to ascertain at the margins. Even in a failed state, some elements of the state, such as local state organizations, might continue to exist.

**State in decline** (Adapted from Crisis States Research Center Workshop, London 2006)

**Fragile State:** significantly susceptible to crisis; institutional arrangements embody and preserve the conditions of the crisis

**Crisis state:** under acute stress; reigning institutions face serious contestation and are potentially unable to manage conflicts and shocks

**Failed state:** no longer able to perform its basic security and development functions; has no effective control over its territory and borders

According to Rotberg (2004), state failure occurs in four stages, and can be classified as 1) weak, 2) failing, 3) failed, or 4) collapsed. Rotberg’s study diverges from the classification employed by the State Failure Task Force Project (2004). The scholars of the project simply distinguish between a failed state and a non-failed state and denote a state as failed if it experiences a revolutionary war, ethnic war, an adverse or disruptive regime transition or genocides in a given year (Howard, 2010). The limitation in the approach of the Task Force is that it fails to account for the degree or severity of conflict.

The Washington based civil society think tank the Fund for Peace developed the Failed State Index using twelve indicators. These indicators cover a wide range of elements for the risk of state failure, such as extensive corruption and criminal behavior, inability to collect taxes, large-scale involuntary dislocation of the population, sharp economic decline, group-based inequality, institutionalized persecution or discrimination, severe demographic pressures, brain drain, and environmental decay (The Fund for Peace, 2009).

Essentially, the indicators of failed states can be grouped into political, economic and social factors. The predominant factors of the decline of the failed states begin with the collapse of the political process. Nation-states fail because they are convulsed by internal violence and can no longer deliver positive political goods to their inhabitants (Rotberg 2004). The process of state failure can often be linked back to the government who is holding power. Indeed the origins of state failure are sometimes attributed to the “governance gap” or leadership failure. However this is an oversimplification of a more complex set of issues and challenges that are contingent on contextual factors.

One of the most important symptoms of state failure is the decline in security. In the context of a strong state the government exercises monopoly over violence within the state. In a failed state, the central authority fails to provide security to its citizens, forcing individuals and groups to look for their own protection through private initiatives. Weak and failed states are unable to provide stable and systematic methods of justice and dispute resolution mechanisms. In essence, for a state to function it needs judicial codes and procedures, rule of law, and property rights. The political participation is undermined in failed state, as citizens are unable to participate freely, openly, and fully in politics and the political process. Fundamental civil and human rights are not respected.

# **Towards A Nuanced Understanding of Failed States**

Written by Ahmed Khaled Rashid and Elayna Hamashuk

As noted earlier, the state is also primarily responsible to provide a whole range of other social services such as health, education, and social welfare. The state is also expected to provide the desired framework conditions in which economic activities take place and businesses and enterprises are able to operate. The state offers the regulatory and infrastructural backbone for business and commercial activities. A failed state is unable to provide these protections and conditions. As a result, domestic investments decline and an informal economy flourishes. An important distinction must be made between states that are weak due to inherent geographical and physical constraints (that expose them to recurrent natural calamities, for example) and those that encounter endemic political problems, despotism, management flaws, internal conflicts or external attacks.

In a number of African states, civil wars stemmed from ethnic, religious, linguistic, or other inter-communal antagonisms. However, these divergences in ethnicity and race should not be perceived as primary causes of state failure. These can be regarded as a contributor to worsening situations. Often, at the centre of the strife we observe lucrative sources of resource wealth, such as petroleum deposits, drugs, diamond fields, minerals, or timber.

Failed states are sometimes unable to exercise control over all or part of their territory. Government jurisdiction extends to the capital and sometimes a limited number of other cities or zones. As a result of losing claim over vast areas of territory, the state fails to control their borders. This is observed in a number of strife ridden countries in Africa, where neighboring countries, groups or tribes have actively participated or fomented trans-border violence. In failed states rebels, warlords, and other vested groups command authority over different patches of territories and zones.

Despotic leadership is too commonly blamed for failed states. A number of authoritarian rulers have suppressed their own citizens, especially groups that are regarded as opponent. The ruling classes oppress, extort, and harass the majority of their own compatriots while privileging a more narrowly based party, clan, or sect (Rotberg, 2004). A patronage-based system develops and status quo is maintained to favor the rulers. Quite often these complex networks and systems of patronage consume the whole state functionaries. Corruption becomes rampant. The plight of the ordinary masses in a failed or failing state becomes desperate. They are exposed to violence, exploitation, deprivation and starvation. Ordinary citizens are denied access into the clientele based businesses.

Because the social contract that binds inhabitants to the state is breached, citizens increasingly turn to the kinds of sectional and community loyalties like tribes and clans that are their main recourse in time of insecurity and their main default source of economic opportunity. They transfer their allegiances to clan and group leaders, some of whom become warlords (Rotberg, 2004). In the different parts of the failed states, warlords reign supreme, terrorizing the people. At the same time, the warlords establish relatively stable systems of power bases, and patronage linkages are able to siphon off money through the sale of drugs, arms smuggling or other criminal and illegal activities. All of these issues contribute to the fragile context of the failed state, playing a part in the prevailing anarchy that naturally accompanies state breakdown and failure.

The above analysis, representing the dominant body of literature, provides a “normative” state-centric view of the dynamics of state failure. It often fails to recognize key players, actors and systems (that matter on the ground) that do not fit into the “orthodox” paradigm. Critics of this perspective argue that it is more useful to analyze a state’s weakness/strength on a continuum of “state-performance” than as part of a comparison between two opposites. A state’s ability to provide security, maintain territorial integrity, and promote economic development, varies across time and space. States can strengthen as well as weaken. As such, collapse and failure are by no means fixed categories, but temporary conditions used to characterize the political-institutional situation in a territory (Verhoeven, 2009).

State failure/collapse, is a highly subjective, flexible label that is used when it suits the international community. Many post-colonial governments, before and after 1989, not only failed to deliver socio-economic development, they also seldom controlled their entire territory, had no monopoly on violence and sometimes exported their instability, yet by no means were they considered to have ‘failed’ (Verhoeven, 2009). Also, it must be noted that the link between terrorism, conflict, crime and failed states is not always direct. Failed states may not necessarily be lawless. New forms of political authority emerge organically over time and often provide greater human security than a predatory

# **Towards A Nuanced Understanding of Failed States**

Written by Ahmed Khaled Rashid and Elayna Hamashuk

state.

## **A closer look at Somalia**

Somalia is often cited in the discussions on failed states. Indeed, the country appears to be the very definition of what we call a failed state. Since 1991 it has been without a functioning central government, being the longest running instance of state collapse in post colonial history (Menkhaus, 2006). Somalia was ruled by dictator Siad Barre until 1991, when he was driven out by a national rebellion. Under Barre, Somalia had a semblance of a functioning government, with law enforcement, tax collection, and some basic public services. However, after Barre's exit, political power over most of Somalia fell into the hands of feuding warlords, who, like grand dukes from the European Middle Ages, deployed their private armies to battle for power even as hundreds of thousands of other Somalis were dying of hunger (Cockburn, 2002). Outside intervention did little to help and usually made things worse. In 1992, after the government's collapse, U.S. troops were sent into the country as part of a U.N. mission to avert famine. However, US troops soon became entangled in local power struggles, ending in a humiliating withdrawal (Cockburn, 2002).

Somalia's complete state collapse is unprecedented and has defied easy explanation. However, exploring the Somali situation as three distinct crises – collapse of central government, armed conflict, and lawlessness – offer a framework of analysis. There have been significant changes in the nature and intensity of conflict and lawlessness in Somalia since 1991, with conflicts becoming more localized and sometimes less bloody, and criminality more constrained by customary law practices. These trends are linked to changing interests on the part of the political and economic elite, who now profit less from war and violence and more from trade and industry. Whereas warlords at one time relied on violence to maintain the security of a given state faction, illegal economies now serve to provide stability where a nonexistent central government no longer can. Treating the Somali conflict as three separate crises makes it possible to explore the political and social underpinnings of the past two decades of upheaval. Furthermore, it invites discussion of the proper means for intervention, if any, in the country.

### *Complete State Collapse*

This is perhaps the most dramatic feature of the crisis in Somalia. Since January 1991, there has been no functional, central government in the country. There have been numerous efforts to re-establish a central state, all unsuccessful. Although the formation of a national government in 2002 appeared promising, it too has failed to become even minimally operational and has not gained wide recognition (Le Sage, 2002).

The complete collapse of the central government in Somalia is not inherently linked to other crises in Somalia, such as armed conflict and criminality. In fact, Somalia has repeatedly shown that some communities can enjoy relatively high levels of peace, security, and lawfulness despite the absence of a central authority (Menkhaus, 2006). This is not to say that a central state is not necessary, or that the collapse of the state has not come at a high cost to Somalis. It is only to assert that one cannot attribute all of Somalia's multiple woes to the collapse of the central government. A product of this observation is that strategies to address problems such as criminality and armed conflict, which presume that a revived central government is the solution, are inadequate and likely to result in disappointment.

### *Armed Conflict*

Since 1988, Somalia has been a zone of intermittent armed conflict. During the civil war, from 1988-1992, armed conflict was destructive and widespread. However, since the the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) intervention in 1992, armed clashes have generally been more localized and brief (Menkhaus, 2006). Furthermore, armed conflict has not been coincident with state collapse in Somalia. Peace can and does exist despite the absence of a central authority. Likewise, the establishment of a central government will not necessarily eliminate armed conflict. Instead, it could transform some conflicts into insurrections or secessionist struggles, pitting government against all sorts of rebel forces.

The intensity of violence has changed since 1992, as has its nature. In the early 1990s, fighting was mainly inter-

## **Towards A Nuanced Understanding of Failed States**

Written by Ahmed Khaled Rashid and Elayna Hamashuk

clan, pitting large lineage groups against one another. However, over time, Somalia has seen the trend of warfare descending to lower levels of clan lineage, so that conflict is now mainly internal (Bakonyi & Stuvoy, 2005).

The devolution of warfare to lower lineage levels has several implications. It means that warfare has become much more localized; clashes are contained within a sub-clan's neighbourhood. Conflicts are also shorter and less deadly, in part because of limited support from lineage members for internal squabbles, in part because of clan elders' ability to intervene. In addition, violence against civilians is virtually unheard of because perpetrators are now likely to face repercussions in subsequent clan reconciliation processes (Bakonyi & Stuvoy, 2005).

Warlords have also become less of a factor, as few have the funds to pay a militia. For about the past decade, businessmen in Mogadishu, who previously funded warlords, have refused to pay, and hire their own militias instead. Gunmen, though often poorly compensated, will fight for whoever can pay, not for a clan or a cause – though when a clan is attacked they will likely be mobilized temporarily without compensation.

Efforts to negotiate an end to internal conflicts are rare from the international community. Rather, reconciliation efforts are mainly left to the clan leaders. External mediation tends to focus on state-building rather than peace-building, despite the fact that the average Somali could benefit more from restored peace than from a revived central government.

### *Lawlessness and Criminality*

A third crisis facing Somalia is lawlessness and criminality. The collapse of the state has created the conditions for lawless behaviour, just as outbreaks of armed conflict create an environment conducive to opportunistic criminality (looting, rape). In Somalia, however, in the context of state collapse and armed conflict, informal systems of governance have been able to ensure a reasonable rule of law and personal security. This is one of the most intriguing paradoxes of contemporary Somalia.

Where Somali communities have been able to establish and maintain a high level of lawful behaviour, this has almost always been accomplished by clan leadership and the application of customary law. To maintain this order through customary law, two conditions must be met. First, the restoration of authority and responsibility to clan leadership. Second, the establishment of a rough balance of power within clan groupings (Bakonyi & Stuvoy, 2005). In this sense, lawful behaviour in Somalia is best understood through the lens of international relations theory – as patterns of cooperation and conflict in a context of anarchy. Clans seek a rough balance of power both to avoid being overrun and to enhance enforcement of customary law, reinforced by adherence from all sides.

However, lawless behaviour in contemporary Somalia remains a problem. Ironically though, the most egregious crimes are committed by the top political and business leaders whom the international community convenes for peace conferences. This includes introduction of counterfeit currency into circulation, huge land grabs, export of charcoal, and involvement in piracy (Bakonyi & Stuvoy, 2005).

Piracy, in particular, is currently the fastest growing industry in Somalia and will likely become the country's largest generator of revenue. Despite the absence of a central bank and the context of a country that deals largely in corruption, piracy may be seen as an industry because it has the potential to accomplish what most legal industries in countries with robust economies can – it provides goods and services for people who, in this particular case, have limited access to them.

### *An 'alternative' Model*

Failed states provide unparalleled economic opportunity, but only for a privileged few. Those close to the ruler or ruling oligarchy grow richer while their less fortunate brethren starve. Such patrimonial systems of governance, the theory holds, are the starting point for protracted state collapse (Pitcher et al., 2009). Scholars have explored the dimensions of what they call "personal rule" or "big man rule" in specific settings where autocratic leaders retain

## **Towards A Nuanced Understanding of Failed States**

Written by Ahmed Khaled Rashid and Elayna Hamashuk

power, accumulate wealth, and maintain order by relying on patrimonial authority. Patrimonial systems exhibit a number of core features: the flouting of rational-legal authority in favour of highly personalistic presidential rule; a reliance on patron-client ties and networks for professional and political advancement or support; the use of state resources to reward supporters for their loyalty; and repeated appropriation of states funds by African leaders and their followers for personal enrichment. In these cases, the informal takes precedence over the formal and the private conquers the public (Pitcher et al., 2009).

The authority and so-called legitimacy of the autocratic leader relies on his ability to channel state resources to an extensive patronage network. By maintaining a network of privileged clients (ministers, department heads, etc.) within the state apparatus, the leader gains the loyalty not only of those who remain close to him but of those who constitute his clients' networks as well. In this way, through the trickle down of state resources, the leader extends his reach over large portions of the population. To ensure his monopoly on power and loyalty, the leader must not allow any of his personal clients to become overly powerful. Thus, he creates an increasingly large network, ensuring that his clients not become too comfortable and that they must compete for their resources.

In this way, the leader maintains his position of authority and gains the loyalty of a widespread array of networks. However, as is the case in this patrimonial political system, his authority relies completely on his ability to deliver the "public goods." When state resources dwindle, so too does the leader's power. In many post-colonial African states, leaders enjoyed the comforts of a patrimonial system so long as Western aid dollars were flowing in.

With the end of the Cold War in 1989 however, African states were no longer of significant geopolitical interest, and aid flow to corrupt, despotic rulers ceased. As the 1980s came to a close and foreign aid was suspended, autocratic rulers who had been propped up by a bipolar international system, found themselves unable to funnel resources to their extensive patronage networks. Those privileged clients, with their own networks to provide for, quickly lost confidence in their leader's ability to sustain the flow of resources. Lacking the means to provide for their own networks, those close to the leader, who had become accustomed to receiving resources, become disgruntled when their leader cannot deliver.

Often, they cut ties with the leader, breaking off to form their own factions and creating a volatile situation which eventually results in a power struggle. The once privileged few become warlords, often controlling their networks in a specific territory. In most cases, these warlords turn to illegal industries to maintain support of their networks in a way that state resources were once able to do. In this way, state failure (the absence of a central government) does not necessarily result in the absence of governance. There is no black hole or vacuum of governance; rather, there exist multiple local governance type structures, a result of warlords maintaining order in separate factions of the state.

### *The Model in Somalia*

In pre-colonial Somali society the clan was a cornerstone of organization. Political decisions as well as access to land and water were regulated within the clan system. During the post-colonial state building period this traditional form of social organization underwent substantive changes. The Somali state under former military dictator Siad Barre represented a typical patrimonial system, in which the traditional Somali clan structure was integrated into the modern state apparatus. At the beginning of his reign, Barre was eager to incorporate all members of the major clan families in the state administration. However, a decrease in accessible resources in the late 1970s led to the exclusion of certain clans from the state and hence, from economic benefits (Bakonyi & Stuvoy 2005). This dwindling base of state legitimacy was compensated with a rapid increase in repression.

Without the ability to integrate large parts of the population into his patrimonial system, Barre would find it difficult to safeguard his power. Even the high levels of Cold War generated foreign aid, funds which supported Barre's extensive patronage network, would not be sufficient to maintain stability. The state had been in decline for more than a decade when the civil war began in 1988. In the long run, Barre's political and economic discrimination as well as increased repression against certain clan groups was directly linked to the formation of insurgent groups that mobilized recruits on the basis of clan affiliation. The successive disintegration of the state reached its peak at the end of the 1980s. With Western donors freezing aid in 1988-89, the central government withered and was left

# **Towards A Nuanced Understanding of Failed States**

Written by Ahmed Khaled Rashid and Elayna Hamashuk

virtually devoid of resources. Barre could no longer afford to sustain his patronage networks, nor could he sustain the state monopoly on violence, as historically repressed clan groups began to form their own militias.

Somalia's patrimonial political system effectively marginalized members of clan groups who were not integrated into Barre's patronage networks. In the early 1990s therefore, violence and fighting was mainly inter-clan in nature, pitting lineage groups against one another. After the fall of the government in 1991, Somali disintegrated completely into factional warfare. An economy of plunder developed, in which militiamen were compensated primarily by robbery and looting. By the end of 1992, UNOSOM was charged with the task of demobilizing the country's many militias and reviving a central government. Unsuccessful, UNOSOM withdrew in early 1995, leaving Somalia in a state of war and collapse (Bakonyi & Stuvoy, 2005).

## **Leadership in Failed State**

Instead of holding the political leadership entirely responsible for a state debacle, it is perhaps worthwhile to observe some systemic features of African states. A number of authors have argued that the existence of African states is illusory because they do not fit into the pattern of statehood in the Western world (Akinrinade, 2009). Most African states have struggled to function internally as states. The colonial powers determined state boundaries and as such states did not emerge through indigenous processes of state building. Colonists adopted a divide and rule method in principle and practice. This resulted in the invention of new ethnic identities and characteristics. Essentially, most African nations are aggregations of different indigenous societies and political cultures. (Akinrinade, 2009).

The grouping together of disparate peoples did not facilitate an internal consolidation process. As a result, African leaders are faced with the challenges of bringing together divergent groups and achieving internal unity. In this difficult context, leaders had hardly any choice but to reach out and consolidate their positions by favoring particular ethnic or religious groups. Such patronage based networks gradually monopolized power and eventually led to divisions, disunity, disintegration and fragmentation. In most instances the political opposition had little respect for deliberative processes and engendered a confrontational political milieu. The leaders advanced narrow selfish interests but were constrained in trying to govern for a common collective good. The rulers also struggled to transform the weak institutional structures such as law enforcement and the judiciary, which were de facto organs of colonial authority. Therefore, poor leadership alone is insufficient to cause the collapse of the state.

The speed with which de-colonization and independence occurred created the context that generated politics based on patronage. The need to construct political alliances at short notice with minimal resources and the absence of party organization outside urban areas meant that nationalist leaders – typically urban, union-based teachers, union leaders and administrators – had to rely on existing political structures. This meant finding individuals – often chiefs or other prominent notables, and using patronage to bind these individuals to the party, and local voters to candidates (Di John, 2010). A number of leaders used disorder as a political instrument in a context where confusion, uncertainty and chaos characterize the political culture.

While giving precedence to factors such as authoritarian rule, the body of contemporary literature often ignores factors such as the international political economy, external interferences and various transnational forces. Thereby, the institutional breakdown of the African state is implicitly but wrongly linked to a breakdown within African society (Hagmann & Hoehne 2009). During the Cold War era, African leaders were consistently used as pawns in the proxy wars. Following 1989, the United States' "split personality" was manifested in their intermittent dichotomy of policy directions between democracy promotion and the war on terrorism (Carothers, 2005). A number of African leaders were obliged to manage such dualism. Appeasing the Western powers and donor agencies as well the domestic constituencies of hungry masses proved to be a challenging proposition even for the most astute of African politicians.

Certainly, as in the case of Somalia, the dynamics of state failure cannot be explained only by leadership failure. To a large extent the current neo-patrimonial systems and indigenous forms of local governance can be attributed to factors such as clan politics. The clan is the single most important factor in Somali society as clan loyalty undercuts the sense of shared nationhood. When Siad Barre came to power, he vowed to end clan based divisions.

# Towards A Nuanced Understanding of Failed States

Written by Ahmed Khaled Rashid and Elayna Hamashuk

Nevertheless he himself had no option but to rely on clanism and patronage to perpetuate his hold on office (Akinrinade, 2009).

## Tackling State Failure: Somalia

As intimated above, our understanding and framing of failed states has far reaching implications. International actors, Western powers, and global multilateral institutions are compelled to correct the failed state, because nation-states constitute the building blocks of the world order in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Stability and predictability of states have become desirable international norms (Rotberg, 2004). During the last decade there have been numerous instances of interventions led by UN and other countries in failed African, Asian and Oceanic states. The international mandate has ranged from peace making and peace keeping, to halting human suffering, to more expansive state building efforts. The approach and conceptualization of these efforts mostly had a normative orientation. Nevertheless, international actors have sometimes been ambivalent about their role, often not being able to reach agreement amongst themselves on the mode of operations. To be sure, there is no established framework for international engagement with regard to fragile or failed states.

One of the key interests of policy makers with regards to failed states is the threat or risk to security it poses to the outside world, especially to the West. The chief example for this claim is Afghanistan, which descended into chaos in the 1990s and became a breeding ground for *Al Qaeda* as it prepared to attack the US. Somalia has seen an increase in the power bases of the *jihadi* groups, a concern to US officials. However, this argument is contended by some other authors who claim that global terrorism seems to profit less from failed states and more from weak ones. An example of such a weak state is Pakistan, where some element of the regime is actively assisting the terrorists. There are, however, many drastically failed states (Burma, Congo, Haiti) that pose no global terrorist threat (Zakaria 2010).

For the most part, the debate surrounding failed states reveals a dogmatic assumption and wishful thinking that all states will in the long run converge towards a model of Western liberal democracy (Hagmann & Hoehne 2009). In the case of Somalia, this expectation will be grossly mismatched with the institutional guideline for external state-building and reconstruction efforts. The external actors must also be cognizant of the fact that the desire for reversing the process of state failure may not arise from within. Indeed, in Somalia the warlord system has represented a kind of social order. The warlord does not need to seek control of the state to maintain this social order. Therefore, warlords may not be overly interested in rebuilding the state and in fact they may resist any efforts to change the status quo.

The local power of the warlord relies upon personal loyalties. His network looks to him to provide the public goods and services. It may be difficult, therefore, to develop a strong sense of national consciousness amongst Somalis who are accustomed to seeing a local warlord as both public and private provider. For the external actors, focusing on state building may not be the correct approach to the failed Somali state. An institutionalized social order has been developed and sustained in the territory and the region remains functional with localized forms of governance. The clan-based divisions are still prominent and unifying efforts may well be futile. The external actors must be prepared to acknowledge that the traditional sheikhs, radical nationalists and Islamic Courts (who might not share all Western liberal values) do represent legitimate authority for local populations (Verhoeven, 2009) and they need to be engaged in the process.

It must be reiterated that violence has remained an aspect of everyday life in most regions of Somalia. Violent means are often used to articulate political as well as economic competition. Most violent actors in Somalia fall under a broad definition of political extremism that includes pursuing objectives that undermine political freedom, pluralism and democracy while drawing upon stereotypes (Hartmann 2006). The nature of such violence prompts the suggestion that perhaps peace building should take priority over state building. If state building is the focus, the developing state (or quasi state) must have available economic resources and access to the world market. Otherwise, civil unrest could result as a consequence of the disruption of relied upon illegal economies and thus a dwindling supply of local funds.

Again, if state building is the focus, local warlords and their communities ought to be included in the process. Small



# Towards A Nuanced Understanding of Failed States

Written by Ahmed Khaled Rashid and Elayna Hamashuk

polities have been established throughout the territory and have, by now, entrenched their legitimacy. These informal governance systems must be accorded a role in efforts to revive the state if they are to be counted on to recognize the process as legitimate. The establishment of a “paper state” may not be in the best interests of local businessmen. These powerful men make a living off of thriving illegal economies and would likely be unable to do so (or at least would find it more difficult) under the rule of a central government. These affected businessmen must be appeased by ensuring that the Somali state will have access to markets and will be able to engage in trade.

Power sharing arrangements (promoted by Western countries) between the government and rebels/opposition forces – often labelled a ‘Government of National Unity’ has not worked in Somalia (Ayittey 2009). Given that failed states suffer from a cycle of violence, economic breakdown, and unfit government, helping them achieve lasting recovery requires an integrated program of security, economic reconstruction and government reform (Haims et al 2008). In Somalia, integrating policies, actions, and resource decisions across the divide between security and development is going to be extremely difficult. Policies that are narrowly devised to treat specific security and economic problems without sufficient regard for the connections between them that drive the cycle of state failure in Somalia are likely to be counter-productive.

The key approach should be to transform the Somali people to become agents of recovery. The minimum conditions for survival must be met through peace keeping and humanitarian aid. Needless to say, the humanitarian motives of the international community should override (to the extent possible) the foreign policy agendas of the interfering powers, in order for any engagement to be fruitful. Successful peace and state-building have invariably emerged from below – rather than being imposed through a top-down process, as the African experiences demonstrates (Hagmann & Hoehne, 2009). At the same time some aspects of the problems of Somalia, such as arms trafficking, refugee movements, terrorism and transnational criminality (e.g. piracy) must be addressed through an integrated regional and global approach.

## Conclusion

Various factors are responsible for state failure and collapse in different parts of Africa. It is easy to generalize, but these generalizations are not helpful in determining the causes and implications of failure in particular cases, as the situation in Somalia demonstrates (Akinrinade 2009). The basic assumption of this paper has been that alternative actors are able to perform the core state functions in Somalia that the state no longer fulfills. Departing from that understanding, this analysis has tried to disprove the notion that state failure is attributed simply to leadership failures. It has offered elements of an alternative model to illustrate how governance without government has been relatively functional in Somalia. As we have observed, the absence of a central government does not necessarily equate to anarchy.

At the same time, our observations do not imply that statelessness is socially desirable or without ominous consequences for the population concerned. Lastly, the paper has provided some food for thought for external agents in crafting their broader strategic approaches to tackle situations as seen in the case of Somalia.

The two most significant stories of the modern political history have been the way in which non democratic rule and stateless warfare have retained their prominence (Booker, 2010). Unfortunately, the enduring character of state failure in Somalia epitomizes this fact. It is imperative for the international community to step up its efforts to orient its policies to a nuanced understanding of the magnitude and multitude of problems in Somalia. Creative solutions that shun reductionist approaches, and adopt a long term perspective ought to match the complexities of the problems at hand.

## References

Akinrinade, B. (2009). *Human rights and state collapse in Africa*. Utrecht, The Netherlands: Eleven International Pub.

Ayittey, G. B. N. (2009). An African solution solving the crisis of failed states. *Harvard International Review*, 31(3),

## **Towards A Nuanced Understanding of Failed States**

Written by Ahmed Khaled Rashid and Elayna Hamashuk

24-27.

Bakonyi, J. & Stuvoy, K. (2005). Violence and social order beyond the state: Somalia and Angola. *Review of African Political Economy*, 32(104), 359-382.

Brooker, P. (2010). *Modern stateless warfare*. New York : Palgrave Macmillan.

Carothers, T. (2005). Promoting democracy and fighting terror. *Foreign Affairs*, 82(1), 84-97.

Chomsky, N. (2006). *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Cockburn, A. (2002, July). Somalia, a failed State? *National Geographic*, Retrieved from <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0207/feature3/fulltext.html>

Crisis States Research Center (2011). Crisis State Research Centre. Retrieved from <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/crisisStates/Home.aspx> .

Di John, J. (2010). The concept, causes and consequences of failed states: a critical review of the literature and agenda for research with specific reference to sub-Saharan Africa.

*European Journal of Development Research*, 22(1), 10-30.

Fund for Peace (2011). *Failed State Index*. Retrieved from <http://www.fundforpeace.org/global/?q=fsi>

Hagmann, T. & Hoehne, M., V. (2009). Failures of the state failure debate: evidence from the Somali territories. *Journal of International Development*, 21, 42-57.

Haims, M. C., Gompert, D. C., Treverton, G. F., & Stearns, B. K. (2008). *Breaking the failed-state cycle*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp.

Hartmann, H. (2006). *Violence, extremism and transformation*. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung.

Le Sage, A. (2002). Somalia: sovereign disguise for a Mogadishu Mafia. *Review of African Political Economy*, 29(91), 132-138.

Menkhaus, K. (2006). Governance without government in Somalia. *International Security*, 31(3), 74-106.

Pitcher, A., Moran, M. & Johnston, M. (2009). Rethinking patrimonialism and neo-patrimonialism in Africa. *African Studies Review*, 52(1), 125-157.

Rotberg, R. (2004). The failure and collapse of nation states. In Rotberg, (Ed), *When States Fail*. Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press.

Verhoeven, H. (2009). The self-fulfilling prophecy of failed states: Somalia, state collapse and the global war on terror. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 3(3), 405-425.

Zakaria, F. (2010, July 18). The Real Failed-State Risk. *Newsweek*. <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/07/19/the-real-failed-state-risk.html>

—

Written by: Ahmed Khaled Rashid & Elayna Hamashuk

# **Towards A Nuanced Understanding of Failed States**

Written by Ahmed Khaled Rashid and Elayna Hamashuk

Written at: University of Ottawa  
Written for: Prof. Michael Williams  
Date written: April 2011