

Are Failed African States a Threat to the Western World?

Written by Luke Godfrey

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LUKE GODFREY, AUG 22 2012

Failed or weak states and the risk they pose today is given prominence in the mass media and is an uppermost priority for many policy makers. These states, largely in the Third World, are often framed as one of the greatest threats to the international system since the end of the Cold War, but the linkages made between these areas and the risks they are assumed to produce are rarely reviewed critically by more than a small cohort of scholars and analysts.

Problematizing the discourse of the failed state is key to understanding whether these areas do pose a genuine threat to the West, or whether the concept serves another agenda.

There is considerable confusion over what the term 'failed state' means, with a long list of adjectives used by scholars, often interchangeably, such as a weak or quasi state and collapsed or failed. This has resulted in a wide range of states labelled as failed, despite a variety of features and contexts (Patrick, 2007: 647). Ask for an estimate of the number of failed states in the world, and anywhere from 7 to 50 may be identified (Hehir, 2011: 312). What these terms have in common is in reducing the complex history of states such as Somalia or Yemen and their problems to a measurable standard against an idealised Western state model. Failure to conform to this standard is usually attributed to 'third world' incompetence and corruption over external causes (Doty, 1996: 153) rather than the possibility that the imported state of colonialism may be unsuitable to the political economy of a society (Bilgin & Morton, 2002: 74). Some 'failed states' in Africa and elsewhere have never functioned in a way recognizable as a Weberian state (Patrick, 2007: 647). However, for the examination of whether these states pose a security threat to the West a working definition is needed. The term failed state is broadly understood to mean that a state cannot function administratively, provide essential services to its citizens, or has lost control of its coercive functions/control over territory (Hehir, 2011: 314; Wyler, 2008: 27).

The rise to prominence of failed states as a security issue for the West since the end of the Cold War and 9/11 is illustrated by the following quote;

As the Cold War concluded in the early 1990's, analysts became aware of an emerging international security environment, in which weak and failing states became vehicles for transnational organised crime, nuclear proliferation pathways, and hot spots for civil conflict and humanitarian emergencies (Wyler, 2008: 8).

Today the definition of a failed state commonly regards it as unable to maintain order within what would usually be considered its sovereign space, and implicitly regards the only way to do so through the efforts and support of the international community. At the extreme end, this has resulted in calls for a return to imperialism (although it is arguable that imperial relations were never abolished) in order to impose order onto power vacuums by more sophisticated actors (Mallaby, 2002: 2). In this can be seen a reproduction of the traditional man/modern man divide of colonialism (Doty, 1996: 155). The end of the Cold War also saw a substantial increase in the number of states, many of which do not provide the functions that might be expected of them, and so enhancing the number of states which are seen as being vulnerable to 'failure' (of which most are identified in the South) (Rotberg, 2002: 130). As it stands the structures and practices of the Cold War continue to frame and interpret knowledge around failed states (Bilgin & Morton, 2002: 56), serving to facilitate particular interests and policies (Bilgin & Morton, 2002: 67).

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The discourse of security has largely superseded that of development, with corresponding shifts in policy (Abrahamsen, 2004: 680) – “In the wake of September 11, the threat of terrorism has given the problem of failed nation-states an immediacy and importance that transcends its previous humanitarian dimension.” (Rotberg, 2002: 127). Rather than addressing pressing humanitarian needs, policy is more often set by the imperative to protect the ‘here’, from the ‘elsewhere’ (Abrahamsen, 2004: 682). The rhetoric which sustains this discourse is itself problematic, with some statements making sweeping generalisations and non-specific references to threats such as “[w]hether loosely arrayed in symbiotic relations or co-ordinated by a central brain, they [corrupt elites, terrorists, mafioso etc.] find space to operate in the vacuums left by a declining or transitional state – and they eat what they kill” (Crocker, 2003: 37), without providing empirical support. A failed or failing state is referred to as the primary base for these threats, without being supported by evidence, context, or even a detailed examination of the type of threat which may emerge, illustrating a problem with substantial portions of the literature on failed states. The securitised approach also presents domestic elites with the opportunity to appropriate the discourse in an instrumental manner. Jack Straw’s highlighting of the threat of failed states to the UK as a tactic in consolidating support in the run-up to the Iraq war (Abrahamsen, 2004: 682) and Algeria’s ‘hyping’ of a terrorist threat to garner aid and military assistance (Keenan, 2006: 274) demonstrate just how threats can be co-opted to serve the agendas of domestic elites in a position to control information – insecure conditions in such regions make information vulnerable to manipulation. The possibility of millions of dollars for the purposes of ‘security’ provides a clear incentive for some governments to conform to the thesis of failed states breeding security threats (Keenan, 2006: 275).

The linkage of failed states and terrorism is often taken for granted despite a degree of ambiguity surrounding it, and increasingly failing African states are placed within the context of the wider global War on Terror with the dangers they pose to the West emphasised and placed at the forefront of debate (Abrahamsen, 2004: 677). Although such states have long been acknowledged as deadly to their own or neighbouring populations, the globalised threat of terrorism in particular has led to the representation of such states as a wider threat to the international system and the West (Abrahamsen, 2004: 678). The residence of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan would appear to have cemented the connection between terrorism and failed states in the minds of policy-makers – never mind that Afghanistan would not necessarily qualify as a failed state under commonly used criteria such as the Failed States Index (although it has steadily progressed up the rankings since, to the 6th spot in the 2010 edition). The linkage might have the standing of common sense, but there is no clear correlation between a failed state and its attractiveness to terrorist organisations (Hehir, 2011: 315). Indeed, some intelligence estimates put the preference of terrorist groups being for ‘condos’, that is states with infrastructure to facilitate the flow of information, finance and individuals (Wyler, 2008: 10). Whilst some terrorists undeniably come from, or receive training in failed states, the data does not bear the supposition that this is a significant quantitative proportion of the terrorist threat to the West (Simons & Tucker: 388).

Nonetheless, “[a]ccording to this perspective, the threat menacing Western society derives from sub-state groups that thrive on the conditions endemic in failed states.” (Hehir, 2011: 310). There are both advantages and disadvantages for groups operating in failed states depending on their organisation and goals, and this may account for the differing views on the utility of failed states to terrorist organisations. Whilst training camps in Afghanistan prior to 2001 provided direct support to the al Qaeda network and similar camps may do the same in Yemen today, increasingly tactics have changed, groups evolving in a different direction and tend towards the ‘home-grown’ variety (Simons & Tucker, 2007: 389). Failed states may not then be essential to terrorist networks, but in some ways they do confer considerable advantages in raising the threat groups are able to pose.

Insecure zones, where conflict is rife, continue to provide on the job training to militants, and double as test beds for new tactics. Thanks to the information networks spanning the world, tactics and methods can be exported to groups with no connection to the region, through other groups or simply the mass media, with even academia playing a role in identifying vulnerabilities (Simons & Tucker, 2007: 390). The argument that failed states are isolated from the international system is becoming less true as information technology progresses, enabling groups in such regions to run virtual networks and maintain a tenuous link to globalisation despite the difficulties of such environments (Dempsey, 2006: 11). Operations such as that of Al-Ittihad al-Islamiyya (AIAI) have been able to operate from Somalia, but have been limited to the region in carrying out attacks (Dempsey, 2006: 12). Instead, such ‘hubs’ are better placed to provide ideological and logistical support, being difficult to locate and neutralise, but more limited in

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the range of targets accessible to attack (Dempsey, 2006: 15). This is one argument as to why failed states should be regarded as a security threat to the West that cannot be easily refuted.

That failed states have considerable levels of insecurity few analysts would deny. However, it is often presumed that in the absence of the state, social life degenerates into an almost Hobbesian state of nature, and ignoring the probability that other forms of social organisation will arise based around different networks, familial or financial ties etc. The state is only the latest guarantor of security rather than the only one, as many in the West with a history of a unitary nation-state tend to forget. This may work to mitigate security issues arising from a breakdown in control by the central authority, but equally it can confer further advantages on to terrorist groups. Where the bonds of society no longer revolve around the relationship to the state, more exclusive communities may form, which the West cannot penetrate. Should terrorist groups share a common identity or grievances, they may be able to gain access to a social system that the West cannot, and use this for cover and support (Simons & Tucker, 2007: 400).

The proliferation of WMD's is a major concern for most states, with insecure stockpiles around the world, and corrupt states providing further opportunities for groups interested in obtaining WMD's – "Revelations about the international arms bazaar of Abdul Qader Khan [Pakistan's chief nuclear scientist] suggest that poor governance may be the Achille's heel of global non-proliferation efforts" (Patrick, 2007: 654). Given the Manichean perspective of groups such as al Qaeda, where the deaths of civilians is fully justified, an important psychological barrier to planning the use of such weapons is removed (Blum et al, 2005: 144). Although primarily concern revolves around stocks of WMD's in countries such as Russia or Pakistan, Africa is also a candidate for posing a substantial security risk. The continent holds 18% of the world's known uranium resources, many located in weak or failing states and are insecure as a result (Blum et al, 2005: 144). Some analysts point to the utility of failed states as providing the security and anonymity (from international scrutiny) that would likely be necessary to develop such programs, particularly with regard to nuclear materials. However, others argue that individuals with the skills necessary to obtain materials and develop them would in any case be able to operate in a range of political structures rather than just failed states (Blum et al, 2005: 144) as the example of the Aum sect in Japan's use of Sarin gas demonstrates, there is no clear criteria to determine where a group may find it best to operate (Brussels, 2003: 3). Although no groups are thought to have the access or expertise to use such weapons, the possibility of a single active nuclear weapon poses a threat by virtue of its high impact, material and psychological (Blum et al, 2005: 145). Given this the possibility that failed states might be used by a group to insulate themselves from the international system is a serious threat, despite its low probability.

There are several concerns lower down the policy agenda than terrorism, which is linked to failed states, one of which being international organised crime. Once again failed states are implicated in the political economy of the threat. Drugs, arms, people and profits from criminal enterprise are all said to pass through failed states, exploiting the lack of the rule of law (Patrick, 2007: 655). Substantial evidence, however, points to symbiotic relations between state and crime as the most attractive operating environment for transnational criminal networks (Keenan, 2006: 286). Increasingly there are also crossovers between terrorism and organised crime, with most international terrorist organisations operating funding networks that make use of 'black spots', which may be in failed states to facilitate financial activity and other trade (Blum et al, 2005: 158).

One threat that is not as well known is the possibility of failed states, where healthcare is slim or non-existent, acting to incubate infectious diseases. Given a lack of healthcare capacity in such areas, this is a serious concern for the populations there, but it is debatable as to whether this poses a serious threat internationally. New pathogens, or new strains of old ones continue to transmit themselves internationally in developed states or emerging economies. Failed states however are among some of the most vulnerable (Patrick, 2007: 656), and this is exacerbated by the tendency for social strife to have a strong negative impact on public health – "The collapse of the Democratic Republic of Congo likewise made that country a Petri dish for the evolution of numerous strains of the virus [HIV/AIDS]." (Patrick, 2007: 657). Eradication programs are the most effective defence against the spread of disease, but are also the most costly economically and politically. Smallpox eradication was one of the most successful examples of such an effort, but it also carries important lessons for disease control today. One of the areas where it was almost fatally undermined was the re-introduction of the disease from countries, which had not been willing/able to implement the eradication programme of vaccination back into countries which had (Barrett, 2007: 180). The possibility for just one

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country to do so carries obvious parallels with failed states particularly, given the lack of a comprehensive social/administrative structure through which to act. This is a key obstacle to the provision of global public goods such as the eradication of virus, or preventing its dissemination (Barrett, 2007: 181).

Western interaction with Africa has been increasingly militarised since the popularisation of the failed state discourse by the U.S. and others (Abrahamsen, 2004:681). This shift is not wholly without cause, given that these ungoverned areas do pose some security risks internationally, but these threats often have a more complex relationship with failed states than presumed in the West. There are several key flaws, the narrowing of the security agenda to focus on the failed state meaning that similar threats elsewhere are not always recognised as such, and sweeping generalisations persist in linking failed states directly to threats even where the evidence does not support it. Critiques that place the failed state within a paternalist or civilised North/uncivilised South discourse (Jones, 2008: 182) have a point, some uncritical reflections being the result of ethno-centric and Orientalist perspectives. The West, through the concept, creates new structures of exclusion from the established international order, denying failed states legitimacy as autonomous actors and constructing them as the Other (Doty, 1996: 155). The continued state focus in some contexts seems to be misplaced, given the transnational and de-centralised nature of many of the threats identified – they are by no means unique to particular failed states and groups such as al Qaeda have demonstrated in their ability to operate in almost any political structure. The ungoverned regions do offer some unique challenges to global security, but largely by functioning to insulate groups that operate across territorial borders. Overall, whether a state is failing would not appear to be a defining factor in many activities that the West considers security threats, and leads to the question of whether the failed state is an appropriate framework for addressing them at all. The discourse offers little in the way of explanation, at its heart a reactionary thesis by virtue of its ahistorical premise (Jones, 2008: 184), largely unable to offer solutions unless it historicises each case.

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