

State Failure, Insecurity, and the International System

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NATHALIE VERSAVEL, MAR 7 2013

Do You Share the View that 'State Failure' Has Become the Major Source of Insecurity in the International System?

Interest in state failure has grown extensively in the past decade. The *European Security Strategy* of 2003 reported that the phenomenon of state failure has become one of the main threats to the European Union today (Stewart 2007, 646). Enduring violence, disharmony between communities, loss of authority, growth of criminal violence, and inability to provide political goods, are indicators that Rotberg provides to examine the nature of failed states (Rotberg 2010, 5). Furthermore, the Failed States Index defines a failed state with a body depleted of state capacity and economic prospects, where potential for violent conflict is high (Haims *et al* 2008, 1). The purpose of this essay is to evaluate the causative nexus between state failure and global insecurity. Drawing from the case study of Somalia, the argument will infer that the very nature of failed states gives rise to transnational threats such as terrorism, piracy, conflict spill-over and refugee flows, all of which are major sources of insecurity in the international system today.

State failure is a source of international insecurity. As explained by Rotberg and the Failed States Index, the nature of failed states correlates with the optimum habitat that terrorist organizations often seek. There are four qualities that such organisations strive for in a state. First, the state must have an existing infrastructure, allowing the organisation to carry out its basic functions (Rabasa and Peters 2007, 16). However, the given infrastructure must be weak to a certain degree to allow the organization to carry out its functions without raising suspicion (*ibid*). Secondly, access to local sources must be available to fund their income (Rabasa and Peters 2007, 17). Furthermore, the social characteristics of the communities must be vulnerable enough to be subject to intimidation by these organizations and must have grievances against the state, possibly channelled through violence (*ibid*). Lastly, an element of invisibility is required (Rabasa and Peters 2007, 20). The challenge with this factor is that a balance must be found between blending in with the local population while simultaneously asserting their presence in order to carry out the functions necessary (such as communication networking and recruitment) to allow them to prosper (*ibid*).

Patrick Stewart proclaims the affiliation between terrorism and state failure is often exaggerated because not all failing states are equally attractive to terrorists (Stewart 2007, 653). Based on this account, it can be implied that Stewart believes weak, rather than failed states, breed terrorism. Nevertheless, this essay maintains the stance that whether or not the relationship is strong, there remains a correlation between failed states and terrorism because of the ideological support, training bases, weapon access, conflict experience, and recruits that such nations often provide to terrorist bodies (Stewart 2007, 652). Stewart thus attempts to relegate the association, however, evidence will demonstrate that he is unsuccessful in doing so as the mere description of a failed state provided by Rotberg and the Failed States Index correlates with the traits that terrorist organizations seek.

The Council on Foreign Relations describes Somalia as a poor, chaotic Muslim country with no central government, an unguarded coastline, no strict borders and lack of law enforcement; therefore, a "safe haven" for terrorist organizations (Cohn, 2000). Recent Somali terrorist activities support the above claim. Global actors have become increasingly concerned with the Somali Islamist group Al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI), a former military wing of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) which has continuously waged war against Somali state forces, aiming to overthrow the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and enforce Sharia law (Al Jazeera 2011a). According to Ken Menkhaus,

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such instability can be traced back to the overthrow of Major General Siad Barre's regime in 1991, setting the stage for Islamist forces to struggle for power (2004, 65).

Several events have associated Somalia with terrorism since the nation's collapse in 1991. In 1996, assassinations and hotel bombings in Ethiopia were traced to AIAI (Menkhaus 2004, 69). Two years later, the American embassy in Nairobi, Kenya was bombed, and although no Somali individuals were involved in the actual attack, later evidence showed that Somalia acted as a transit point for bomb material (Menkhaus 2004, 70). In December 2002, a hotel in Mombasa, Kenya, was bombed and investigations revealed that those responsible for the attack fled to Somalia after the attack for safety (*ibid*). Six months later, in June 2003, the United States embassy was bombed again in Nairobi, which, for the first time, directly involved Somali individuals associated with al-Qaeda (*ibid*). We can infer from the above cases that Somalia is involved with terrorist acts. Having demonstrated Somalia's involvement with terrorist activities, we can argue that terrorism flourishes in failed states. The nature of failed states correlates with traits that terrorists seek, and therefore state failure is a source of global insecurity.

The United Nations Law of the Sea Convention defines piracy as "any illegal acts of violence or detention, or any act of depredation, committed for private ends by the crew or the passengers of a private ship or a private aircraft" (Anyu and Moki 2009, 95). Piracy is an additional transnational crime that flourishes in failed states due to the fact that criminal networks exploit environments where the rule of law is absent, such as in conflict zones (Stewart 2007, 655). A driving force for piracy is poverty and corruption, as individuals are driven to resort to criminality to fund their survival (Anyu and Moki 2009, 97). Thus, one can claim that piracy thrives in states where there is lack of law enforcement, and where individuals are angered by the current political or economic situation.

Somalia holds one of the largest and most dangerous piracy organizations known today. Due to the lack of governance in the early 1990s, Somalia's territorial waters were largely un-policed and, in response, the local fishermen took it upon themselves to protect the seas (Lennox 2008, 8). Over the years, small groups of armed fishermen have escalated into a large piracy organization, and "maritime muggings evolved into complex, international organized crime" (Lennox 2008, 9). The problem is that the more Somalia fails as a state, the more piracy will increase in frequency as their weapons and techniques become more sophisticated, and thus consistently pose a greater global threat (Lennox 2008, 11). The Gulf of Aden, the body of water to the east of Somalia, is an immensely important gateway where up to 20,000 ships pass through yearly to get to and from the Suez Canal, and up to 30% of Europe's oil and gas is transported (Anyu and Moki 2009, 103). The Gulf of Aden is also where Somalia's pirates are the most active. In 2008 alone, Somali pirates attacked about 100 ships and a total of \$120 million ransom money was obtained (Anyu and Moki 2009, 104).

Furthermore, there have been two high profile piracy cases that triggered global attention, demonstrating that piracy presents not only a regional threat as formerly assumed, but also a transnational one. On September 25, 2008, a Ukrainian ship containing 33 Russian-made T-72 tanks was attacked and seized by Somali pirates (Anyu and Moki 2009, 106). This particular case was problematic because although the vessel claimed to be heading towards Kenya, reports eventually determined that, in reality, the ship was heading towards war-torn Sudan, even though the United Nations had recently banned shipment of arms to Sudan (*ibid*). This case demonstrates the potential global consequences of Somali pirates' actions.

Several months later, in April 2009, a the American ship *Maersk Alabama*, containing food relief for Kenya, was seized, and the crew and captain were held hostage for several days (Anyu and Moki 2009, 108). The United States Navy reacted by attacking the pirates, killing three and freeing the captain (*ibid*). These two cases clearly demonstrate the seriousness and intensity of piracy as a global security threat. It is evident that piracy directly challenges the international system as it involves international trade routes, drawing in many actors. A global alarm was raised and international states realised that piracy had become a "sophisticated operation", evidently with dangerous consequences (Anyu and Moki 2009, 107). Therefore, piracy flourishes in failed states because of its lawless and poverty-stricken nature, and it can be confidently inferred that state failure has become a major source of insecurity in the international system due to the fact that the nature of failed states leads to transnational threats, such as piracy and terrorism.

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A further argument to support the thesis is that state failure is a source of insecurity because of its spill-over consequences. Local conflicts have international implications as the unstable nature of a failed state can spread to neighbouring countries through refugee flows (Iqbal and Starr 2008, 319). There are two reasons local consequences of state failure can spill-over into neighbouring countries. First, countries often feel obliged to come to the assistance of their neighbour when their co-ethnics are being threatened across the border (Atzili 2006, 140). In his work *When Good Fences Make Bad Neighbours*, Atzili calls this the “kin-country syndrome” (2006, 140). He writes that as ethnic groups are often spread across several countries, tensions can result, which is common in weak states due to the fact that ethnic groups often have more of a connection with their co-ethnics across the border than their own government, since governments often do not provide political goods to their citizens (Atzili 2006, 153). Essentially, ethnic divisions across territorial boundaries have an impact on politics, and, as a result, local conflicts often escalate into international conflicts (Woodwell 2004, 220).

The second reason is that refugee flows into neighbouring states are often the basis of insurgent and counter-insurgent groups (Atzili 2006, 140). From this assertion, we can infer that as ethnic groups flee to neighbouring countries as a group, insurgent groups can form against the government of their home country, which instigated their reasons for becoming refugees in the first place. For these reasons, it is often impossible that unrest in a failed state remains absolutely isolated from its neighbours and the region as a whole, demonstrating that state failure is indeed a major source of global insecurity.

With the case of Somalia, the issue of spill-over is clearly evident with regards to the conflicts between its neighbours, Ethiopia and Kenya. Tensions between Somalia and Ethiopia are long-standing: the source of instability traces to the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), due to the fact that the ICU is rumoured to have an affiliation with terrorism, and additionally because Somalia receives support from Eritrea, which is Ethiopia’s political enemy (Al Jazeera 2006). In December 2006, Ethiopia carried out “counter-attacks” against the ICU, justified on the grounds of protecting sovereignty and to counter ICU terrorist attacks (*ibid*). Several years later, in November 2011, Al Jazeera stated that Ethiopian convoys were once again seen crossing the border into Somalia (2011b). The TNG in Somalia has also been receiving support from their neighbour Kenya in the fight against al-Shabaab, whilst Kenya asserts that they have a right to protect themselves against this terrorist group (Al Jazeera 2011c). The underlying issue here is that, internally, the TNG in Somalia struggles against the ICU that aims to seize power, and Ethiopia and Kenya have subsequently become involved in the conflict, translating ICU’s struggle for power from a local to regional conflict.

It is evident that the internal issues that develop from a failed state (or lead to the state failing in the first place) often spill-over into neighbouring states. Local conflict influences not only the internal affairs of the neighbouring states, but often leads to neighbouring states’ involvement, whether for the sake of helping their neighbour or for self-protection. Regardless of the motivation, Ethiopia and Kenya’s involvement in Somalia’s struggles express the fact that the struggles of a failed state are unlikely to remain entirely local, hence rendering state failure a source of regional, and subsequently international, insecurity.

Insecurity not only results from conflict spill-over, but also from “refugee spill-over”. While addressing the correlation between refugees and conflict spill-over, three aspects must be kept in mind. To begin with, civil wars produce more refugees than international wars as the former are often more intense (Atzili 2006, 152). Secondly, refugees are more common in weak states than in strong states because the former is often unable to deal with the issue due to a lack of resettlement and reintegration options (*ibid*). Lastly, refugees are often the “vehicle through which internal fighting spreads to neighbouring countries” (*ibid*).

This essay will argue that the last factor is the most important with regards to establishing the link between refugees in a failed state and international insecurity. We can assert that there is a direct link between refugee flows and conflicts developing in neighbouring states, and because refugees are the result of civil wars, which are often a result of state failure, refugees are a global source of insecurity. This causal explanation can be supported in several ways. First, the flow of refugees often brings about a flow of combatants, arms and ideologies from neighbouring states, which can increase the spread of conflict (Gleditsch and Salehyan 2006, 343). Refugee populations often support domestic opposition groups of a similar ethnic group, escalating internal struggles of rebel groups in host countries

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(*ibid*).

For example, Somali refugees in Ethiopia have worked closely with co-ethnic Somalis who are separatist in Ethiopia (*ibid*). Furthermore, refugee flows often lead to a demographic shift in the host country, which can intensify internal conflict (*ibid*). In his work the *Productivity of Refugee Camps*, Luca Ciabbari writes, “refugee camps are not simply places where temporary protection and primary assistance are provided, but are also places in which political and social production occurs” (2008, 68).

Refugee camps have shown to be a challenge with Somali refugees in Kenya. Since 1991, many Somalis have fled to neighbouring countries, especially to Kenya, and by October 2011, more than 400,000 Somali refugees were in Dabaab, a town in the North-eastern Province of Kenya, making it the largest refugee settlement in the world (Little 2012, 193). The large refugee population not only presents a grave humanitarian crisis, but also a security crisis as many refugees now live in the ghettos of the country, have low income and introduced a wave of crime there (Menkhaus 2004, 51). Additionally, arms flow by Somali refugees has increased. Up to 5,000 automatic rifles per month are brought into Kenya by Somali refugee groups, which is partly due to the fact that the Kenyan-Somali border is largely uncontrolled (*ibid*). Kenya’s internal situation has deteriorated partially as a result of this refugee problem. Menkhaus stresses that the increase in arms flow has worsened the inter-ethnic relations in Kenya, which has the potential to escalate to a local or even regional conflict (2004, 52). The violence of Somali refugees has also largely increased violence among the Kenyan-Somali population, which has the result of “politicising lineage identities” (Menkhaus 2004, 51).

Furthermore, Kenya has lost control over a large part of their north-eastern territory, where the refugee camp is situated, and it is becoming just as lawless as its counterpart across the border in Somalia (Menkhaus 2004, 52). The flow of refugees evidently has costly consequences. With such refugees come arms, new ideologies and new conflicts that can easily escalate into regional insecurity (Gleditsch and Salehyan 2006, 343). Thus, it can be concluded that, given to the problematic nature of refugee camps and due to the fact that the refugee problem is a common consequence of a failed state, state failure has become a major source of global insecurity.

The essay thus far has examined and supported the causative link between state failure and global insecurity. Having established this, it is interesting to address an alternative approach, more specifically, the way Western states deal with the phenomenon, as they often only address certain states as ‘failed’. Such states are characterized by being a threat to the security of Western states, specifically the United States. Boas and Jennings argue that the term ‘state failure’ is entirely political (Boas and Jennings 2007, 476). From this view, we can imply that Western states recognize state failure when there is bilateral insecurity, rather than global insecurity. The concept of state failure is based on the assumption that all states are “alike and function in the same way” (*ibid*). For example, Afghanistan could have been considered a failed state for many years because of its numerous human rights abuses, however, these did not seem important enough to address prior to 2001. It was only when the United States’ national security was threatened by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, that the United States addressed Afghanistan as a ‘failed state’ (Boas and Jennings 2007, 479). The fact that the Western world sees state failure only as a problem when it is a threat to them makes us question whether state failure really is a threat to global security. A state may be weak but not pose a threat to Western security, so does that protect it from being defined as a failed state? Consequently, are all failed states sources of global insecurity?

In the past years, the importance of the failed-state problem has become “widely recognized” (Haims *et al* 2008, 2). This essay attempted to evaluate the causative link between failed states and the consequences of conflict, and the effect that it often has on its neighbouring countries and subsequently on the region. It has been argued that the nature of failed states gives rise to transnational security threats such as terrorism, piracy, conflict spill-over and refugee flows, which have the ability to destabilise not only the region, but also the international system, making state failure a major source of insecurity today. Thus, it is evident that insecurity in the 21st century no longer comes from powerful states, but rather from failed states (Haims *et al* 2008, 1).

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