

International Security and "Failed States": A Cause for Concern?

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/07/25/international-security-and-failed-states-a-cause-for-concern/>

FRANCESCO CECON, JUL 25 2014

Introduction: failed states enter the security realm

"Failed states that cannot provide jobs and food for their people, that have lost chunks of territory to warlords, and that can no longer track or control their borders, send an invitation to terrorists" (NY Times, 2005). After the 9/11 attacks, a link between terrorism and failed states has indeed been established. These occurrences did draw the question of failed states, previously grasped as a humanitarian problem (Patrick, 2007), at the top of the list of the international community security concerns (von Einsiedel, 2005; Yannis, 2002). Failed states, before 9/11, were seen in a 'Somalia-collapse-model' light and then converted into an existential peril (Itelman & Patner *in* Newman, 2009).

There is an increasing trend in Western capitals to label everything as a security threat, and the question of failed states faced the same fate; weak and failed states are included in a voluminous amount of security sources and are portrayed as both direct and indirect security menaces from which the West should watch out. Yet, in many cases, theoretical frameworks on the matter seem not to resist when matched to empirical analyses on the topic (Logan & Preble, 2011). Using official statements, a failed state is "a security concern, as it provides fertile ground for terrorism, drugs, and the like" (White Paper, USAID 2003, 4). Yet, there is no agreed definition or notion on the features that distinguish a weak or a failed state from those 'functioning-states' belonging to the international system. Although the data collected by a number of *Indexes* such as, for instance, the *Human Development Index*, the *State Fragility Index* and the *Failed States Index*, which use of a large range of economic/political/security criteria to draw up their lists could, at first glance, appear appropriate, a comparative analysis of these tools reveals different outcomes. Indeed, while some countries appear in all of these lists, other states are present in some guides but not in others and vice versa (Newman, 2009).

The outcome is that, perhaps, the way the state is conceived itself, together with the understanding of security, needs to be called into question. The different results of these indices reveal, to some extent, that there might be different ways to envision statehood as well as security threats. Which 'qualities' define a state as such? And what does constitute a security threat? These inquiries are at the centre of a theoretical security debate on the notion of state and security (Menkhaus, 2004). Generally, approaches to the concept of failed states have undergone from inadequacies as the lack of a clear description of what these states should actually look like and the leaning of grouping all of these countries in one big basket without considering the different contextual characteristics and weaknesses of each unit (Patrick, 2007). Henceforth, the epistemological recurring errors in several scholars' scrutinises can be attributed to the conventional inclination of placing these countries in one single "catch-all 'failed states' category" (Patrick, 2007, 647).

The fictional character of the Westphalian state model

In a realist, Westphalian alignment, security is still comprehended according to its referent entity, the state, fundamental unit of examination in international security (Newman, 2009). States are then viewed as unitary rational actors that play in an anarchical system and which are compelled simply by the might of other units (Krasner, 2001). Thus, a difference in capabilities of states is an enduring feature of the global configuration (Jackson, 1990).

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Essentially, realism believes in the sovereignty of these elements and in a security perspective grounded on a military distribution of power in an anarchic international arrangement, where inter-state conflicts should still constitute the major security concern for states. With regard to failed states, then, security concerns may arise from threats such as terrorism and enforced migrations (Newman, 2009). Security threats deriving from weak and failed states are thus regarded as 'indirect' threats to Western societies. Including threats such as terrorism and immigration in the security discourse retrieves that rhetoric of the 'others' who menace the underlying ideals of Western countries (Busumtwi-Sam, 2002). Undeniably, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the relative decline in number of inter-state conflicts arose the Western concern for the implications of states failures, and this made the construction of failed states as a security issue possible, becoming the "quintessential example of securitization: the process by which issues are accorded security status or seen as a threat through political labelling, rather than a result of their real objective significance" (Newman, 2009, 343). Such a marking gives the green light to Western governments for the implementation of inequitable policies in the global South (Patrick, 2007).

Moreover, the definition of a 'failed state' itself presumes the reflection of an ideal type that, in this case, is the conception of statehood. State is defined in accordance to the Western idea of it (Newman, 2009; Bilgin & Morton, 2002) and this, as it will be later considered, constitutes one of the basic information needed to understand the broader phenomenon of state failure and, chiefly, the manifestation of the breakdown of several states in the African continent. The archetype state in Western standards is the one formulated in 1648 during the 'Peace of Westphalia' and the resulting Westphalian model provides an image of how a sovereign state should look like. Expressly, a state should be established on the fundamental principles of territory, mutual recognition, independence and authority (Krasner, 2001). Hence, states exist within territories and "political authorities are the only arbiters of legitimate behaviour" (Krasner, 1995, 116).

Yet, such an ontological construction of the state could fit the actual international distribution only when these elements could be termed as 'impermeable' (Herz, 1957). In fact, the Westphalian model has never truly match reality (Newman, 2009). The sovereign state system is basically an intellectual draft typified by an 'organised hypocrisy' due to the lack of connection between formal rules and actual practices. There are constructivist statements arguing that the sovereign state standard is not a 'generative grammar' but rather a system from which states can diverge. Sovereignty as a principle is given by the shared understanding of which actions a sovereign state should then implement in its internal and foreign affairs (Krasner, 2001) and it can be thus argued to be more a social production arising from specific practices rather than a given settled classification (Bilgin & Morton, 2002). Sovereignty is hence made by the conjunction of the approved external recognition and by the authority exercised by officials on their territory; well-functioning states accomplish both whereas weak and failed states do not. Several failed states did receive formal legal recognition by the international community but, yet, are not able to exercise control over their land and such an external recognition brings with it the implication of non-intervention, another pillar in the sovereign principle edifice, in these countries domestic affairs (Krasner, 2001).

The prohibition of intervention in other states' domestic affairs constitutes the 'negative' side of sovereignty, which led to the formal international rule of *laissez faire*. The positive side of the principle is instead defined by the actual competences of a government to employ power and control over its territory and, conversely from the negative aspect, it is subject to change. The arrangement of the two sides of the same sovereignty coin goes to constitute the well-known Robert Jackson's formulation (1990) of the 'sovereign game'. This definition turns out to be particularly convenient for our inquiry on failed states since it seems to perfectly capture the sovereign paradox that characterises a number of Third World countries that do experience the independence from external 'intrusion' but that, at the same time, are unable to deliver public services (Newman, 2009). Labelling a state with the term 'failed' does not take into accurate account that, although many countries in the global South own a legal external recognition, have never been *de facto* states (Patrick, 2007). Moreover, failed states are considered 'failed' to the extent that they do not correspond to the Westphalian model of statehood that was created in a entirely different atmosphere from the one in which the world finds itself now, and such a construction has implications on how Western governments conceive security and security threats (Del Rosso Jr., 1995).

The political construction of the ideal state appears to serve the major powers, and the Western societies more in general, interests and security agendas (Newman, 2009). The imposition of the notion of statehood does in fact

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reflect, to some degree, the political hegemony exercised by the global North towards the global South. This hegemony, grasped in Coxian terms as dominance of an accepted knowledge that does not leave space to alternatives (Cox, 1981), imposes a Western shared concept of statehood and development, which also puts boundaries on how security should be understood. When statehood is an imposed model and every state ends up looking as a made-in-series unit, security issues of one particular state tend to be addressed in a flawed manner (Bilgin & Morton, 2002). Also, for those states that do not conform to this model, labelled with the terms of 'weak' and 'failed' states, the only way of development is the one created to the image of those states belonging to the global North; so adapting to the economic *laissez faire* of the market and to political liberalism seems to be the paths to follow (in a liberal, democratic peace thesis sense) in order to leave the *status* of underdevelopment (Bilgin & Morton, 2002).

According to the liberal standpoint on global politics, Westphalian sovereign states are the elementary units of the international configuration, which, similarly to the realists' view on it, are rational and autonomous actors that try to expand their power in the system (Krasner, 2001). Both realists and liberals thus conceive the state failure as the inability of the states to adapt to a certain model; yet, the problem of failure is comprehended in two dissimilar manners. For liberals, the problem lies in the resolution of market flops whereas for realists the concern is with conflicts spill-overs (Krasner, 2001). These schools of thought are though feeding the concern linked with the phenomenon of state failure by portraying it as an indirect, however harmful, threat for the West.

Failure is now considered to be the greatest threat to international stability (Atwood, US Agency for Int. Dev. *in* Del Rosso Jr., 1995). This shift in the security realm can be attributed to the fact that, in the post Cold War (CW) era, structures (and principally the figure of the state) "have been deconstructed before our eyes" (Del Rosso Jr., 1995, 196). While for some scholars the way in which we conceive statehood affects the perception of threats deriving from state failure (Buzan, 1983), for others the phenomenon has "arguably become the single-most important problem for international order" (Fukuyama, 2004 *in* Patrick, 2006, 27). Truly, the sovereign states prototypical represented by the Westphalian system never matched with reality and "the time of absolute and exclusive sovereignty has passed" (Boutros-Ghali, 1992, 3:17). Certainly, the occurrence of failures in several countries of the developing world seems to confirm this thesis. Besides, what can be argued to be the factors that determine whether a state can be considered a success or a failure (Milliken & Krause, 2002) when the state is a merely "abstraction, an entity existing chiefly in the hearts and minds of people" (Strayer, 1993 *in* Del Rosso Jr., 1995, 178)?

Failed states and non-traditional security threats

It has been said that orthodox scholars' concerns with failed states are linked to the fear that the security issues existing in global South countries could expand and 'hit' Western societies. The greatest apprehension is definitely caused by terrorism. This concern derives from the assumption that failed states can provide fertile grounds for harbouring of terrorist organisations since these countries do not exercise a true control over their lands, and the link between the failed states of Afghanistan or of Sudan and *al Qaeda*, in this respect, are 'proves' that ungoverned areas constitute a point of attraction for terrorist groups (Patrick, 2007; Der Derrian, 2004). The 'fertility' is due to the possibility of disposing of areas where to recruit and train militants, and where to have a facilitate access to weaponries and economic supplies. With regard to accessing arms resources, the red alarm is tripped by the presumed probability in which terrorists might acquire biological, chemical or nuclear weapons (Patrick, 2006), which, in the hands of senseless players, would pose such a risky threat that the norm of sovereignty would not be enough to protect these states from external intervention (Fukuyama, 2004).

However, establishing a direct link between terrorism and failed states is, to some extent, naïve because it does not take into consideration that not all weak and failed states are plagued by terrorism and the case of Afghanistan is not enough to support the previous hypothesis (Patrick, 2007). Afghanistan can be better explained when other elements such as religion and politics are brought to the table; there is, thus, a series of components that need to be studied in each case. Also, the point that not all failed states attract terrorist groups is due to the fact that not all of them offer an ideal safe haven for these groups. Regions of total state collapse, as it is the case of Somalia, do not constitute idyllic places where to settle for terrorist organisations, but are indeed considered quite uncongenial. Terrorists do, in fact, prefer territories that are barely ruled rather than ungoverned and in the hands of tribal clans (Menkhous, 2004). The

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formation of a logical tie between the two phenomena of terrorism and state failure actually infers that terrorist organisations could not survive in fully working states (again, the model of functioning state is imposed) because efficient governments would impede their operations (Newman, 2009).

State failure has also the collateral effect of making the people of a deteriorating state leaving the country, creating consequently massive refugee flows that destabilise neighbouring countries as happened in the case of Africa (Newman, 2009); for instance, since 1990, circa 100.000 exiles left Somalia and moved to bordering Kenya with the side-effect of fuelling some of the inter-ethnic strains existing in the country (Menkhaus, 2004). The primary concern is not related to the destabilisation of a region itself but rather to the following wave of immigration that would 'disturb' the global North countries (Newman, 2009). Specifically, immigration acquires an even greater role as a danger for wealthy societies when considered in relation with the spread of HIV/AIDS. With the memory, well bore in mind, of the refugee flows following the Haitian collapse and the Balkan hostilities, the European and the American governments are now willing to avoid the reappearance of similar situations (Singer, 2002). The impacts of these substantial immigration movements are deemed to be the fuse of a cultural conflict ('clash of civilisations') between different social configurations (Huntington, 1996).

Failed states are constructed and securitised by Western governments as catalysts of threats for their societies (Menkhaus, 2004), yet, the population trapped in these countries should be considered to be the very principal victim of their states failures and this, should be the first reason of concern for the international community (von Einsiedel, 2005). The inability of many Third World countries to provide public security (in all of its aspects) and the following chaotic consequences created, in such areas, authentic humanitarian disasters (Yannis, 2002). The attention should thus be driven from the 'how failed states threaten the global North *status quo* dilemma' to the important aspects of 'human security'. The security scheme of inter-state conflicts defined the functions of global politics for the majority of the human-beings history but should now leave space to a new way of conceiving security. In reality, for "most people today, a feeling of insecurity arises more from [...] job security, income security, health security, environmental security, security from crime – these are the emerging concerns of human security all over the world" (Human Development Report, 1994, 3). The definition provided in this Report is based on two fundamental constituents, which are the essential safety for individuals from lasting threats such as disease, oppression, and famine, and security from violent interferences in the daily life of the people. Hence, security is here portrayed in a positive and progressive sense since it points out the importance of moral obligations among people (Busumtwi-Sam, 2002).

Human security presupposes the right of the person to be 'free of fear' and 'free of want', so basically to enjoy protection and well-being (Der Derrian, 2004). Nowadays, the greatest challenges to human security are those related to development and, in several countries of the developing world, where "the state is absent, the local population is left entirely at the mercy of unscrupulous political and economic entrepreneurs" (Poku *et al.*, 2007, 1157). Also, the Western concerns with terrorist groups acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in failed states divert the attention from the real menace to security of the people and to the peace of these regions: the flow and illegal trade of small arms (Patrick, 2006). Third World countries had been particularly appealing receivers of arms allocations by the two world powers during the CW (Ayoob, 1995) and currently there are over 875 millions of small arms circulating worldwide (Geneva Small Arms Survey, 2014), where more than a quarter of these items are estimated to be in Africa (Ripsman & Paul, 2010). The low costs and wide availability of these small, however lethal, tools jeopardise the stability of states and regions by fuelling conflicts and by subjecting civilians to the rules of authoritarian clans, chiefly where the absence or the fragility of the state generates an ideal environment for black market affairs and illicit cross-border trades (Patrick, 2006). The porous borders of failed states permit the passage of refugees and the exercise of arms smuggling. Giving data, the amount of arms introduced by Somali exiles in Kenya is approximately 5000 rifles per month (Menkhaus, 2004). Through borders, not only weapons, but also drugs and people become objects of criminal traffics (*i.e.* the cases of Colombia and Myanmar). This uncontrolled movement of people brings with it the spread of disease, affecting the health aspect of security of the population living in the neighbouring countries (*i.e.* Zimbabwe) (Newman, 2009).

The inability of weak and failed states to provide security to their own people is also reflected by the number of health issues that the locals have to face everyday. States, in many cases, are unable to deliver effective health services and the most serious issue of HIV/AIDS has now become part of the lives of a third of the adult population of the

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southern African continent (Elbe, 2006); and an approximate 70% of the HIV positive individuals of the world live in the continent (Kaplan, 1994). The HIV/AIDS disease does not simply affect the health aspect of human security but it does also constitute a hurdle for the economic development of the state (Ripsman & Paul, 2010). According to the World Bank, the virus can be assumed to be the principal threat to economic progress in Africa (Singer, 2002). The illness seems, in fact, to affect the more productive section of the society (Singer, 2002; Barnett, 2006; McInnes, 2006) and this has serious impacts on the levels of production of these countries plagued by the virus. The health facilities expenses and the reduction of foreign investments lead to a significant reduction of the GDP that thus expands the gap of poverty and inequality within the society. However, establishing a nexus between the virus and the phenomenon of failure is quite arduous, since the instability caused by the disease has actual effects in societies where the deliver of health services is uneven and the levels of poverty reach elevated percentages (McInnes, 2006). Yet, the spread of the disease is framed as a security issue in Western capitals only to the extent that such a pandemic could expand until touching their societies (Elbe, 2006). International measures on the proliferation of the virus are then undertaken only when there is a perceived national security threat and "the securitisation of the disease removes the issue from more cosmopolitan and altruistic frameworks of health and development, locating it instead within a state-centric framework, where states are primarily concerned with maximising power and security, rather than with addressing wider humanitarian concerns" (Elbe, 2006, 129).

The centrality of the state in this approach goes beyond the case of disease but, as already noted, involves every possible threat that might derive from the occurrence of states failure. Dangers are constructed in a securitisation process by the major powers policy-makers as scapegoats to divert the attention from their societies' troubles to the developing world and to justify their policies towards this latter (Newman, 2009). Indeed, by displaying the potential threats incubated in failed states as menaces to the Western life style, societies are persuaded of a 'false vulnerability' (Logan & Preble, 2011).

State failure in Africa

The notion of statehood, understood in Westphalian terms, had been applied/imposed in the African continent during the decolonisation process in the sixties/seventies (Ignatieff, 2005). Although independence from the colonial dominion had been a great attainment for the locals, the application of a European notion of sovereignty, seen as the exercise of an effective governmental control over a specific territory, just did not fit with the African context (Herbst, 1996; Milliken & Krause, 2002). The new wave of liberation brought to the new countries a simple juridical recognised independence but, once again, theory did not find any empirical confirmation (Jackson, 1990), and the creation of new states, with artificial confines that unobserved the cultural background, and the absence of a proper governmental control turned out to be a naïve effort of projecting the Western state model in a completely different setting (Del Rosso Jr., 1995; Poku *et al.*, 2007). New entities were then labelled with the term 'state' but the population within these 'states' did not enjoy any of the rights stemming from the freshly gained juridical autonomy, and such a condition of 'quasi-states' reflected a shortage of domestic nation-building processes in favour of external recognition (Jackson, 1990).

Additionally, the rise of so many new states after the process of decolonisation caused a shift in the international configuration and introduced a high quantity of new members in the system (Ayoob, 1995) that were crafted and instilled by the principle of self-determination and, simply imagining the hypothesis of state failure was considered to be repulsive towards the principle itself (Helman & Ratner, 1993). The sudden disruption in the configuration of the international system shifted the 'sovereignty game' to a new dimension based on the value of self-determination and on the development claims of these disadvantaged nations, which nowadays is reflected in the existing friction between sovereignty privileges and external interventions in case of great human rights violations (Jackson, 1990). In several occasion, the principle of sovereignty has been claimed to prevent external interventions in questions related to the suffering of the local population in terms of health, environment and drugs/human trafficking (Helman & Ratner, 1993).

African countries provide a striking example of how the application of the Westphalian notion of statehood in the continent is at the root of the instability of many areas and of the resulting human suffering. The rapid course of decolonisation left some unqualified administrations to rule over portions of territory that did not experience any form

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of administrative arrangements since the colonial dominion was majorly exercised in the urban zones of a land. This made the development of dominant subnational groups and entities possible, and, in several instances, these constitute the actual authorities over specific areas in a country (Herbst, 1997; Duffield, 2005). Warlordism, a clan centred form of authority, is now a spread phenomenon in the continent (*i.e.* Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, DRC) and this is significant to the extent that it implies that sovereignty is thus a social construction arising from conventional practices (Bilgin & Morton, 2002).

The work of William Reno (1999), a milestone in the field, understands Warlordism in relation to their type of 'political economy' defining them as egotistic actors whose main interest is the increase of their power and whose command fail to deliver whichever public service to their communities. However, Reno's analysis lacks an account on the important role of the hegemony established by these lords, which are respected and supported by their population who would not otherwise have any other kind of rule or 'protection' (Marten, 2007). The absence of a superior authority, ethnic tensions and the easy access to weapons leave ample space to conflict outbursts (Herbst, 1997; Gupta, 1993). Internal civil wars have a massive impact on the people. The rapid spread of diseases among soldiers have effects on the larger population (Patrick, 2006) and conflicts trap the countries into political and social quagmires that do not allow them to provide not even basic services; and their consequences are echoed by a long-term wave of poverty, instability and a situation where countries experience a "victory of guns over normal politics [...] with autocrats that deny freedom to their people" (Crocker, 2005, 35). The human security threat of poverty is the cause of starvation and mortality between under five year old children (Poku *et al.*, 2007). In the case of Somalia, the internal conflicts have also destroyed the education system and "by 2004 only 15% of children were attending primary school" (Marten, 2007, 70). Human security is more threaten in Africa than anywhere else, where the levels of poverty are higher than in the rest of the globe.[1] However, policies directed to the continent are still driven by Western national concerns with the containment of these threats outside of their societies, whereas there is an urgent necessity for a 'people-centred' tactic (Poku *et al.*, 2007).

Conclusion: leaving Westphalia

The occurrence of the phenomenon of state failure is another sign that the Westphalian model is not supported by an empirical basis; it is rather a simple political construction that calls for a shift to a 'post-Westphalian era' (Newman, 2009). The Western notion of statehood tended to ignore the fact that many entities have never been actual states (*i.e.* African countries post-decolonisation), and to have a homogeneous vision of failed states that did not consider the different settings of each situation (Patrick, 2007). This is also reflected by the fact that while some countries are highlighted as security threats in Western capitals, as represented by the cases of Afghanistan or Somalia, others are essentially disregarded (*i.e.* Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau) (Newman, 2009). The fiasco in addressing effective specific policies towards these countries can be thus attributed to a lack of understanding of the circumstantial dissimilarities of each case (Patrick, 2006; Migdal, 1988).

From a state-centric, realist, vision of global politics, state failure represents that situation of Hobbesian anarchy in particular regions that needs to be contained in order to protect the interests of the major powers (Yannis, 2002), where rulers have been able to put these states into the national security realm (Del Rosso Jr., 1995). State-centrism approaches to security are inadequate when we think of how referring to the 'artificial construct' of statehood makes no difference in the empirical analysis of situations of failure (Marten, 2007). Conversely to realist views on the topic, the phenomenon of state failure/collapse does not mean anarchy but it rather represents the "collapse of old orders, notably the state" (Zartman, 1995, 2). A human-centred approach to security should then be prioritised since, while threats to the lives of individuals are actually glaring, threats to the security of the states are perceived and constructed by politicians.

Moreover, the realist view of the state as the essential unit of analysis is particularly unsatisfactory because it does not consider the fact that sovereignty and authority, in many areas of the developing world, lie at a subnational level and this upraises matters of human security to an upper point of attention (Ripsman, 2010). If the point of reference is shifted from the state to the actual dynamics within a certain context it is possible to understand the social forces in action (clans, warlords and so on) to then implement more effective policies towards the protection of human security of local people (Bilgin & Morton, 2002; Migdal, 1988). The term of sovereignty should not be understood in the

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orthodox manner but rather as the responsibility of an authority to protect its people over a determined territory (Zartman, 1995). Yet, broadening the concept of security can be useful to the extent that it does not put the state in the first place (Booth, 1998 in Bilgin & Morton, 2002) because "when security is defined in terms that reflect a narrow, Eurocentric conception of statehood, the world is bound to appear a very insecure place" (Del Rosso Jr., 1995, 198). Using the neorealist Stephen Krasner's expression 'compromising Westphalia' (1996) would be worthy because it would recognise the variety of forms that a state can assume. Nevertheless, the international community has been very traditionalist in accepting other options to the mainstream thinking (Herbst, 1997) and this has diverted the attention from the very security concern deriving from failed states: the suffering of the people stuck in these states who are facing the everyday challenges related to underdevelopment that is enduringly affecting the global South with no sign of decrease.

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[1] Africa is assumed to be home for more than the 30% of the global poor (Poku *et al.*, 2007).

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Date Written: May 2014*