

Failed States and Terrorism: Justifiability of Transnational Interventions from a Counterterrorism Perspective

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Abstract

Failed states as a global security risk have occupied an important place in international politics for over two decades, but it was the added threat of terrorism since 2001 that made them appear even more menacing and opened the door for external interventions, ostensibly for the purpose of counterterrorism. The failed state – terrorism link has often been accepted and acted upon without the in-depth critical examination it warrants, considering the implications for both the international community and the states labeled as failed. Through presentation and analysis of contrasting scholarly opinions on the issue, this paper argues for a high degree of caution when using counterterrorism as a rationale for transnational interventions into failed and fragile states.

Keywords: failed states, fragile states, weak states, terrorism, interventionism, counterterrorism

Failed States as a Challenge to Global Security

Although the idea of failed states was not new in 2001, the events of September 11 pushed them up the ladder of global security concerns, as they were widely perceived to be sources of terrorism risk.[1] The US National Security Strategy from 2002 onward regularly cites weak and failing states as sources of a broad spectrum of threats, with the 2002 Strategy specifically mentioning Afghanistan as a prime example.[2] Former Director of the CIA and US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates wrote in 2010 that the most serious terrorist threats to the security of the United States are likely to originate from failing states and that dealing with such states presents “the main security challenge of our time.”[3] The idea of failed states as sources of terrorism also features in European strategic thought. The 2003 European Security Strategy cites terrorism as one of the “obvious threats” that can be associated with state failure;[4] the Strategy from 2010 stresses the need for special attention to weak and failed states to prevent them from becoming hubs of organized crime or terrorism.[5]

The failed state – terrorism connection appears intuitively plausible,[6] which may be one of the reasons facilitating its acceptance without a more thorough questioning. While this often occurs in the media and politics,[7] it is also not uncommon to find scholarly works that take as given the notion of weak and failed states posing a serious terrorism-related risk to global security, and continue to build on that premise.[8]

This article presents arguments commonly used to prove that failed states indeed are a terrorism risk, as well as those pointing to the contrary. It highlights a cross section of academic studies on the relationship between terrorism and state failure, and proceeds to offer possible explanations for their often conflicting conclusions. The data indicating that “fixing” failed states does not appear to be an optimal counterterrorism approach is elaborated on; this is followed by the critique of securitizing state failure through the threat of terrorism for the purpose of allowing external actors to use exceptional measures, closing with the conclusion that terrorism should not be used to rally additional support for interventions into failed states.

Perspective I: Why Failed States Present a Terrorism Threat

Putting aside for the moment the complexities arising from the process of lumping together vastly different states under the failed state label,[9] there appear to be a number of reasons why state failure should indeed create an environment both attractive to international terrorist groups and susceptible to terrorism from within. As far as international terrorist organizations are concerned, the most commonly quoted risk associated with failed states is that they provide a form of sanctuary—a territory outside of the influence of legitimate

government where such organizations can function with impunity. This makes it possible for them to set up bases for planning and rehearsing attacks,[10] as well as training camps. The porousness of borders that often accompanies state failure facilitates transnational activities,[11] thus increasing the risk of exporting terrorists and weapons needed to commit acts of terrorism.

The rationale behind failed states as a permissive environment for domestic terrorism appears even more compelling, as factors contributing to state failure largely overlap with those commonly considered to be root causes of terrorism. Human insecurity conditions play an important role in creating dissent[12] and provide terrorist recruiters with a pool of young men, often unemployed, in conditions of poverty or close to it, disillusioned by the failure of government to provide for their basic needs. With high levels of corruption being an important indicator of state failure, citizens may resort to acts of terrorism to bring about regime change.[13] As law enforcement capacity is weak or nonexistent, terrorists can use drug trafficking or smuggling as sources of income.[14] State failure is often compounded with ethnic conflict, some sort of a rebellion or an outright civil war, possibly including actors from neighboring states or representatives of the international community. Globally, there is a strong connection between terrorism and civil war,[15] with terrorism being the dominant tactic of rebel groups fighting democratic governments[16]. Ongoing civil conflict degrades official security capabilities, opens up attractive targets and increases the flow of refugees.[17] Weapons are usually readily available in such conditions, and the range of tactics considered acceptable can easily include acts of terrorism against a civilian population and whatever government institutions may still be functioning. Terrorism may also be employed against foreign or international representatives within the failed state if they are viewed as the cause or a contributor to the condition the state is in. Failed states undergoing internal conflict can also serve as testing grounds for new terrorist tactics and provide on-the-job training for local terrorists,[18] both of which can potentially be exported later to be used against other states. Some areas of weak and failed states may be inaccessible to outsiders due to ethnic homogeneity,[19] creating a safe haven for local terrorist groups.

Perspective II: Why Failed States Do Not Present a Terrorism Threat

On the other hand, there are equally compelling arguments against the failed state – terrorism connection. International terrorist organizations may find it prohibitively difficult to operate in fully failed or “collapsed” states due to a number of reasons, and face many of the problems any organization intent on functioning in such an environment would encounter. The presence of fewer foreigners in failed states makes foreign terrorists more conspicuous and limits their ability to infiltrate local population for purposes of hiding or committing attacks; they are also more exposed to direct counterterrorism action by international actors as the problems associated with violation of state sovereignty are lessened by the failed status of the state.[20]

This fact, coupled with the threat of violence from indigenous groups contesting for power and the likelihood of betrayal from poverty-plagued sectors of the population, forces terrorist organizations to devote considerable resources to ensure their own survival and security.[21] While borders of failed states with immediate neighbors might be more porous in some cases, being a citizen of a failed state or having been registered as visiting one makes it more difficult to cross international borders, thus limiting the options of perpetrating an act of international terrorism. Efficient financing of terrorist operations requires at least some functioning financial infrastructure for the transfer of funds, and conditions of general state failure make many of the standard fundraising activities almost impossible.[22] Economic and human security variables, often mentioned as root causes of terrorism, have in fact shown little effect on increasing susceptibility of local populations to adopting terrorist methods or joining terrorist organizations.[23] While armed groups in civil wars do use terrorist tactics in an attempt to improve their effectiveness,[24] they appear to be detrimental to such groups in the long term as they diminish their capacity for negotiation.[25]

The problems inherent to operating in failed states lead a number of authors to conclude that it is in fact weak states, instead of fully failed ones, that present the most significant risk of terrorism; it is the transition periods, especially from authoritarian regimes to democracy, coupled with violent political instability, that are most critical.[26] In addition, weak states are sometimes ruled by power structures that are corrupt, sympathetic

or tolerant of the terrorist cause, making it possible for terrorist organizations to operate, using existing infrastructures and without dedicating major resources to protecting their own security.[27] On the other hand, when weak state structures are opposed to terrorist organizations, they themselves become the most common target of terrorism, thus also increasing the number and likelihood of attacks.[28] Finally, it has to be taken into consideration that the state-centric perspective in general is becoming increasingly outdated when dealing with international terrorist organizations that demonstrate ever-diminishing dependency on territory for the planning or execution of their operations.[29]

Contrasting Opinions in Scholarly Works

A number of scholars have undertaken qualitative analyses of the relationship between failed states and terrorism, and there does not appear to be a clear set of conclusions all authors can agree on. Analyzing the data on 19 states in the Middle East and North Africa from 1972 to 2003, Piazza concluded that state failure is a “consistent positive predictor of terrorism, regardless of how terrorism is measured or how terrorist attacks are sorted.”[30] He reinforced that claim in his 2008 article where a sample of 197 countries are tested from 1973 to 2003 to show that states experiencing intense failure are more likely to both be targeted by terrorists and to export terrorism to other countries.[31] Tikuisis analyzed the relationship between states on the 2006 and 2007 Failed State Index and incidents of fatal terrorist attacks and arrived at the conclusion that the link between weak states and fatal terrorism is unquestionable.[32] Newman made the argument that state weakness is only relevant in relation to terrorism when the nominal government is not tolerant of the terrorist organization operating within its borders. He used several different indexes of state failure to show that while the most destructive terrorist organizations indeed are located in weak or failed states, this cannot be explained by the conditions of weakness or failure since most weak or failed states do not exhibit significant terrorist activity.[33] A statistical analysis of fragile states in sub-Saharan Africa concluded that factors such as the lack of security, corrupt state authority, lack of essential public goods, and the inability to protect private property significantly increased the likelihood of citizens supporting the use of political violence; but it also failed to show that ungoverned territory, or the absence of the state, leads to increase in political violence.[34] In fact, it has been argued that the prioritization of the need to exert positive control over territory leads to approaches that are more military in nature, which in turn can cause a downward spiral of state failure.[35] Coggins analyzed the 1999–2008 period and generally concluded that counterterrorism efforts in failed states should concentrate on those experiencing violent political instability rather than those failing due to human security or state capacity issues.[36] Hehir paired foreign terrorist organizations with data from the Failed State Index to show that out of the top 20 most failed states in 2006 only Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan exhibited a notable presence of foreign terrorist organizations, while 13 states in that group contained none; also, out of 31 states that contained more than one foreign terrorist organization, only 3 appeared in the top 20 of the 2006 Failed State Index.[37] A quantitative analysis of 2008 using terrorism data from the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START, University of Maryland) center and the Failed State Index by Plummer voiced the opinion that root causes of terrorism, as well as those of state failure, were complex, and other factors, country history being one of them, needed to be taken into consideration when attempting to establish a relationship between state failure and terrorism,[38] or we risk employing a wide range of policies based on “anecdotal evidence or isolated examples.”[39]

Accounting for Differences in Conclusions

A persistent problem when attempting to establish a link between state failure and terrorism is the question of what exactly qualifies a state as failed. This issue is made additionally problematic by the introduction of failure modifiers; a state may also be labeled weak, fragile, failing or collapsed. Such choice of words implicitly suggests a kind of a continuum of failure. However, as state failure is a complex phenomenon made up of a number of indicators, but most often ultimately presented as a single score, the usefulness of comparing states according to their ranking in any of the available failure indexes is questionable. The Fragile States Index (formerly Failed

States Index) combines social, political and economic indicators to create a list of countries categorized under “Very High Alert” on the negative to “Very Sustainable” on the positive end of the spectrum, again suggesting a continuum of fragility.[40] This kind of simplification can be problematic when used for drawing conclusions about state failure and terrorism, as most failed states vary significantly with regard to levels of terrorism.[41] The variations in definitions of terrorism, itself a contentious point, create additional points of divergence.

A very cursory comparison of the Fragile States Index (FSI) and START’s Global Terrorism Index (GTI) for the year 2013 immediately highlights some of the problems that occur when attempting to relate fragility and exposure to terrorism, especially in a linear fashion. The country with the worst FSI score was South Sudan, while it took 20th place on the GTI, and even that is somewhat misleading as its GTI score was almost half the score of Iraq, the state most affected by terrorism in 2013. India was ranked 6th on the GTI, with Philippines, Thailand and Russia taking places from 9 to 11, respectively; the same countries ranked 81st, 52nd, 80th and 85th on the FSI.[42] Of course, the FSI and the GTI are far from being the only sources used for quantitative research on the relationship between failed states and terrorism, and the choice of the source may have some influence on the conclusions, along with the choice of what to focus on when performing the research and how to weigh and present the results. In 2013, Thailand suffered 332 recorded incidents of terrorism, while Nigeria suffered 303; but when the numbers of total fatalities are compared, the ratio is 131 in Thailand as opposed to 1,826 in Nigeria, thus creating a significantly different impression of the actual impact on terrorism on those two countries.[43] It is left to the author to decide what indicators he/she will use, and this decision can be another subject of contention. For example, Tikuisis criticized Newman’s choice to use the presence of major terrorist groups in a given country when analyzing its connection to terrorism and opted for occurrences of fatal terrorism incidents in that country as a better indicator.[44] Because of such divergencies, it is essential to place studies on the relationship between weak states and terrorism in proper context.

The relationship between terrorism and war is one important example of a potential risk of drawing the wrong conclusions. A state experiencing civil war, ethnic conflict, armed revolution or violent political instability is likely to suffer acts of terrorism used as a tactical tool.[45] Approximately 72 percent of terrorist attacks between 1970 and 2012 occurred within countries during periods of major conflict.[46] At the same time, such states are also likely to be categorized as failed, either because of the violence itself or because of the combination of violence and other commonly used indicators. However, if that violence is not clearly named as the principal source of terrorism, there is a risk of coming to a conclusion that all forms of state failure increase the risk of terrorism.

“Fixing” Failed States in Order to Counter Terrorism

How do attempts to “fix” failed states relate to counterterrorism? Existing data suggests that using nation-building as the principal counterterrorism tool may be not only ineffective, but also counterproductive. The idea that a hitherto fragile state can be made unappealing to terrorist organizations by transforming it into a liberal democracy, either by physical intervention or through a strong external influence on local actors, is not supported by evidence, and many such efforts have proven to be problematic at best.

If counterterrorism is the only or principal motive for action, costly and complex nation-building undertakings seem to be an excessive waste of resources, even under the assumption that such an approach will eventually accomplish the stated objective. Direct action taken against terrorists has shown to be significantly more effective,[47] and such operations are usually made simpler by the absence of a fully sovereign state. The unilateral action by the US during the 2011 Operation Neptune Spear caused tensions in the US-Pakistan relations because Pakistan perceived its sovereignty to be violated.[48] On the other hand, counterterrorism operations in failed states, especially within ungoverned territories, such as the US-targeted assassination of Al Qaeda ringleader Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan in southern Somalia, carry little risk of significant political complications.[49]

Furthermore, as it has been mentioned previously, transitional periods from conditions of failure or

authoritarian regimes to democracy have shown to be particularly prone to violence, including terrorism. Fukuyama admitted that the problem with weak states is insufficient local demand for change and conceded that in many cases interventions have made the situation worse.[50] This risk appears particularly high with large-scale interventions, such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq, when the ensuing power vacuum facilitated internal violent struggles with heavy use of terrorist tactics. There are, however, indicators that state-strengthening can be a potentially effective counterterrorism approach in specific situations when existing government structures are genuinely committed to and engaged in counterterrorism efforts and the threat of terrorism is obvious, but there is a lack of operational capacity.[51]

Also, existing data indicate that, from a purely practical standpoint, cultivating liberal democratic regimes is perhaps not the optimal course of action if counterterrorism is indeed the main objective of intervention. Such regimes have proven to be more vulnerable to terrorism because of internal constraints on the scope of available counterterrorism tools and present a generally more permissive environment.[52] It seems that authoritarian states are in fact better equipped to deal with terrorism.[53] Major terrorist groups gravitate towards weak states with a better human rights record and economic performance.[54] Piazza's analysis of 19 states in the MENA region suggested that regimes that are more dictatorial are more resilient to terrorism than those demonstrating greater liberalism.[55] His research on a wider set of countries also concluded that transnational terrorism is more likely to occur in, and be produced by, newer regimes and by economically more developed countries with higher standards of living and literacy rates.[56] This, of course, is not meant to suggest that cultivation of or support for dictatorships is in any way justifiable for counterterrorism (or any other) purposes.

Another unintended—although not entirely unexpected—side effect of interventions into failed states for purposes of counterterrorism may in fact be an increased risk of terrorism at home. It seems that the very tendency of democracies to get involved in issues of other states, particularly conflicts, increases the risk of acts of terrorism being perpetrated against the intervening country.[57] This is mostly because intervention in a conflict usually results in at least one side taking offence. And international partnerships against terrorism may be double-edged swords: a military alliance with the US increased a country's transnational terrorism incidence rate by 179%.[58] Interventions are also used by terrorists as a tool for recruitment and as a justification for attacks, as can be seen in the document attributed to Osama bin Laden where Somalia is used as an example of the West attacking a Muslim land, thus supplying the cause for retaliation/defense.[59] This would suggest that refraining from interventions into failed states experiencing violent conflict might actually be a reasonable policy for many developed countries in terms of terrorism prevention.

At the same time, it does appear that terrorism and state failure are mutually reinforcing phenomena. The presence of violent non-state actors, such as terrorist groups, has a snowball effect on state fragility; as a state sinks deeper into failure, the number and influence of such groups tend to increase.[60] A large number of refugees and high youth unemployment—common indicators of state fragility—create an environment conducive to terrorism,[61] while terrorism reinforces state failure by making “wars more difficult to resolve and more likely to recur.” [62] State fragility in post-invasion Iraq was arguably a key factor enabling the creation of what would later become the Islamic State,[63] and the Islamic State has in turn become a key contributor to the perpetuation of that fragility.

Failed States, Counterterrorism and Interventionism

As securitization of states labeled as failed takes place in politics and the media, an increasing number of authors question not only the underlying assumptions, many of which have already been demonstrated as problematic, but also the political motives of those doing the labeling. A major critique aimed at using the failed state label is that it conflates being a failure and merely being different from what is envisaged as an ideal—“the classic European state.”[64] This view of what states should look and function like is supported by what Verhoeven calls “the Orthodox Failed States Narrative”—the idea that failed states present an unwanted by-product of globalization and an obstacle in the path of the liberal democratic order working towards global

peace. State failure diagnosis is generally based on a Realist framework: the state is about power, and failure is the lack of power to exert control, be it over territory, population or instruments of coercion.[65] Non-standard states make the international system uncomfortable, as it does not know how to deal with such entities.[66] The failed state label, and the sometimes occurring term “collapsed state” even more so, seem to suggest that the phenomenon in question is of local origin; it implicitly assumes that there is no blame to be assigned to external actors.[67] It also isolates the failed state and removes its decision-making autonomy, rendering it dependent on “functioning” states,[68] thereby providing a level of credibility to an outside intervention as a potential remedy.

Examples of Afghanistan and Somalia are sometimes used to illustrate the flexibility with which the failed state label is applied, as well as potential implications. Ever since the 2001 attacks on the United States, Afghanistan has played a central role in the War on Terrorism—failed state discourse.[69] Some authors consider Afghanistan under the Taliban both a failed state and a threat to the US, though admitting that it was a rarity as such.[70] However, others question exactly to what extent that held true in practice, given that the US government conducted business-related discussions with the Taliban almost until the 2001 attacks.[71] This highlights the issue of “failed” versus “different” states, and brings to the fore the idea that the use of the failed state label may in fact be primarily based on whether the state in question is perceived as a threat to Western security and interests.[72] In Somalia, the failed state rhetoric “became actionable” with the emergence of a unifying Islamic force, the Union of Islamic Courts, an actor that in fact made some progress towards establishing order. Yet it has been suggested that, because the emerging order in Somalia resembled Afghanistan under the Taliban in the eyes of the US, its status was elevated to that of a threat to international security.[73]

When presented as an international security threat, failed states are usually mentioned as potential breeding grounds or sanctuaries for transnational terrorist organizations. If such reasoning is accepted by the public, a specific failed state (or failed states in general) can be securitized to the point where an intervention, including a preventative one, is perceived as a legitimate act of self-defense.[74] This is made easier by the fact that the War on Terror is already securitized by the media.[75] The threat of terrorism can be used to securitize the concept of state failure, which can then be applied to states deviating from the expected standard, effectively providing the tool for instant securitization, as the securitizing agent is spared from having to make the “failure as a security threat” move for every particular instance of state failure. This is additionally facilitated by the broadness of the failure concept that allows for a very arbitrary application. As the failed states—terrorism connection becomes more intuitively accepted by the broader public, it becomes possible to expand the range of potential candidates for intervention to entire regions, even continents; Abrahamsen argues that the entire continent of Africa is becoming increasingly securitized in Western political speech.[76] Many post-colonial states have always fit the broad definition of failure: their governments were never fully in control of their territory, had no monopoly on violence, they have failed to provide economic security for their citizens and sometimes threatened the security of neighboring countries, but were not labelled as failed until it suited the international community.[77] Such examples make it difficult not to raise the question whether the application of a failed state label is sometimes merely a pretext to generate support for foreign interventions.[78]

The majority of fatalities and injuries from acts of terrorism are not a result of transnational terrorist operations carried out by actors arriving from failed states[79]—it is states of origin that suffer most. In 2013 Iraq accounted for 35.4% of all deaths by terrorism in that year, followed by Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria and Syria, for a cumulative total of 82% or 14,722 lives in that year.[80] For comparison, over the same time period the total number of fatalities due to acts of terrorism in the European Union was seven.[81] Much of the terrorism in weak states remains confined to their territory and is perpetrated by organizations motivated by grievances of local origin, such as FARC in Colombia.[82] Additionally, international terrorists do not come predominantly or even significantly from failed states,[83] and it should be noted that recent developments have turned the threat of transnational terrorism around—Western countries exported more terrorists to Syria and Iraq than vice versa.[84] This also can be framed as a threat with roots in the failed states themselves: it is the failed state that is the source of radicalization aimed at citizens of more stable countries, providing them with skills and experience that could at a later time be used against their country of origin. Therefore, it could be argued that,

once successfully securitized, failed states can be shown as threatening instead of being threatened even in situations when the direction of terrorism flow is clearly reversed.

Conclusion

Due caution should be exercised when presenting either counterterrorism as an additional benefit of state-building or the inverse in an attempt to garner additional support for an intervention into a state labeled as failed. As discussed, counterterrorism and state-building do not necessarily go hand in hand, and the optimal effort to achieve one objective might quite possibly be to the detriment of the other. Placing countries in the context of experiencing failure as a terrorism risk does little to contribute to the solving of their development problems, and may make their situation worse for a number of reasons, not least of which is providing external and internal actors with access to means normally considered unacceptable.[85] The securitized status of failed states leaves them vulnerable not only to presumably well-intentioned international interventions gone wrong but, as was the case with Somalia, to exploitation of that status by their immediate neighbors: Ethiopia used the situation in Somalia to gain support for military intervention and accompanying actions that did little to make Somalia a more secure or stable state.[86]

State failure is a complex issue, and broad generalizations of the relationship between it and terrorism should be avoided, not least because of the policy implications that necessarily follow. The War on Terror in the context of state failure can appear to be one of the “candidates for control of the developing world”,[87] given that it allows the use of selective sovereignty violations for purposes of counterterrorism or terrorism prevention. [88] Because it may appear tempting, policy-wise, to uncritically invoke the threat of terrorism to gain access to options that would otherwise be inaccessible in dealing with certain states, it is to be expected that state failure will continue to be conflated with terrorism risk, both in the media and in strategic documents (though the wording itself will likely be somewhat less decisive than the one used in the first decade of the War on Terror, as more experts continue to voice their concern and additional data highlighting the problems with generalizations on failed states and terrorism come to the fore). But even if questionable ethics behind such approaches are not taken into consideration, available data and experience suggests a much higher degree of caution should be exercised when dealing with the subject of state failure and terrorism than has been the case this far.

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Notes

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