

Failed States: A Paradigm Revived

Written by Robert I. Rotberg

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ROBERT I. ROTBERG, MAR 11 2014

To label as “failed” those nation-states that no longer serve their people remains a powerful indictment. It sharpens policy considerations and singles out those countries which should be of utmost concern to world order. “Failed” also focuses attention on those nation-states that may soon fail; those are countries most in imminent need of external help. Drawing attention in that manner to nation-states that resemble in their national behaviour and outcomes places such as Afghanistan, Somalia, and the so-called Democratic Republic of Congo has great policy utility, if more to provide early warning and diagnostic capability than merely to label, shame, and excoriate. However, for such a taxonomic classification to be policy effective it must distinguish surgically and objectively between categories of countries at risk.

Contrary to what Michael J. Mazarr contends in *Foreign Affairs* (“The Rise and Fall of the Failed-State Paradigm,” Jan-Feb. 2014) there is no “lack of definitional rigor” regarding failed and weak states. Nor do we still require “a coherent set of factors” to define failed and weak states. The problem is that not everyone has accepted what definitional rigour exists and/or that the Fund for Peace-*Foreign Policy* Failed States Index is understandably regarded by journalists and opinion makers as the most accessible definitional resource and standard.

The Fund for Peace-*Foreign Policy*’s annual Failed States Index is certainly the most widely known promoter of the failed state concept. Each June it offers a list of nations that are judged to be “failed” on the basis of a methodological apparatus that is derived in part from surveys of expert opinion and in part from a trolling of media reports using sophisticated and elaborate forms of content analysis. Although 100 variables are considered, inherently the criteria employed are subjective in nature (despite algorithms and a massive database), and conceivably responsive more to selection bias than to objective rigour.

Foreign Policy employs a worthy but questionable scheme which is inherently dependent upon expert or popular opinion. The categories — all good and reasonable ones — demand such a reliance on impressions. To take a few by way of example, “5 – Uneven Economic Development”, “7 – State Legitimacy”, and “9 — Human Rights and the Rule of Law”, are all rubrics which ask that someone, presumably an expert, decide whether or not Burma or Haiti or Iraq scores lower or higher than another state. Under each of these larger categories there are sub-categories, but the critique remains. Those assessments depend on a “feel” for the country and a pooling of the consensus views of outsiders (sometimes insiders). I have participated in similar judgment exercises myself for various rating projects. Every answer is by definition subjective. Note, too, that the Fund for Peace-*Foreign Policy*’s ranking team has but a ten point spread by which to score each country, so that “meaningful” ratings are decided by differences of a handful of points.

In 2013, the Failed States Index rated the usual suspects – Somalia, Congo, Sudan, and South Sudan as the globe’s most failed places, but Chad came fifth, ahead of Yemen and Afghanistan, Haiti followed, before the Central African Republic, and Zimbabwe was tenth. Chad and Haiti are both difficult and poorly run countries, but given the absence in 2013 of major outbreaks of internal violence, what explains how high they rank? For Chad its high scores seem to reflect refugee numbers, a low credit rating, factionalised elites, political prisoners, and a proliferation of small arms. And why is Zimbabwe placed ahead of Iraq and Pakistan? Surely the last two are much more failed and dangerous than Zimbabwe, even under a despot such as Robert Mugabe. Why are dangerous and nearly failed nations such as Guinea-Bissau and Nigeria scored even lower? Furthermore, Syria is only 21st, Mauritania, where al-Qaeda is

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present, 31st, and Egypt, still struggling throughout 2013, 34th. The Index, in other words, rates countries in a manner that seems odd, less than transparent, and not helpful for considered policy making.

There is a much better approach available which potentially provides the rigour for which Mazarr asks.

“A failed state is a country with a government that cannot or will not deliver essential political goods (public services) to its citizens. The state, usually not yet a nation-state, may hold a seat in the United Nations and function as a sovereign entity in regional and world politics, but as far as most of its people are concerned, the state fails them by its inability to perform state functions adequately. Thus, failed states are those political entities in international politics that supply deficient qualities and quantities of political goods and, simultaneously, no longer exercise a monopoly of violence within their territories.” (Rotberg, 2013)

In other words, for policy and research purposes we should attempt to limit our universe of failed states (and “collapsed” states, which is a state beyond failure) to polities that have demonstrably (not impressionistically) failed to deliver minimal levels of good governance – the requisite bundle of political goods – to their citizens *and* are violent internally (thus crossing a red Weberian line). These are the states in the world which rank at the very bottom of all governance rankings if compiled and measured rigorously (The Index of African Governance pioneered this method for Africa).

In 2014, failed states by this very low governance attainment (plus civil conflict) criterion include only Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, with Ukraine, Venezuela, Nigeria, and Guinea-Bissau possible near-term candidates for inclusion. The recovering failed states such as Egypt, Tunisia, Mali, and the Maldives may be considered “failing” — on the cusp of failure, and worth watching, but not failed — because those state capitals now possess a monopoly of violence, have contained fractious non-state actors, and are once again beginning to supply political goods (especially security) to their citizens. Somalia, not Somaliland, is a collapsed state, so does not appear as “failed”. Collapsed states are those polities without effective governments; they are geographical expressions only, albeit often with seats in the United Nations. Although Somalia is now the only collapsed state, that is, a state beyond failure, in prior decades Lebanon, Tajikistan, Liberia, and Sierra Leone were all collapsed states. Now those entities are merely “weak”; the category between “strong” and “failed.”

The lack of performance of governments — governance — determines inclusion or not of countries in the list of those that have “failed” their constituents, not failed in the opinion of expert observers elsewhere. By failing constituents, these states ignore their obligations to their citizens. They fail to provide the essential societal glue of security. Nor do they make their citizens safe. In such states rule of law is honoured in the breach, transparency is mostly absent, political participation is limited primarily to elites, sustainable economic opportunity is rare for most inhabitants, and such social goods as schooling, health services, the provision of clean water and the like are rare. (See Rotberg, 2014, for definitions of governance.)

These deficiencies are all measurable using objective, nationally-supplied statistics such as miles of paved roads per capita, life expectancy and maternal mortality rates, literacy and educational persistence data, GDPs per capita, voting rates, and the numbers of people killed in the throes of civil combat. The Index of African Governance uses fifty-seven variables to measure five bundles of political good, producing a numerical score for each country founded largely on objective criteria. Real internal violence helps to distinguish between a fully failed state and one that performs badly on all governance measures but which lacks all out civil war, as in the miserable, failing, but not yet failed state of Zimbabwe.

Overall, using the fifty-seven variable method and relying not at all on subjective views of experts or on reports subject to content analysis, we can see that failed states are insecure and unsafe, privilege might over right, are robustly corrupt, deny voice most of the time to most of their people, discriminate within their countries against classes and kinds of citizens, offer wealth chances mostly to well-connected ruling elites, other cronies, and roving bandits, and provide human development advances sparingly or not at all. The outbreak of hot insurgencies is also necessary for a state with poor political goods — a “failing” state — to lurch finally into failure.

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Mazarr may indeed have under-appreciated the rigour that is available for the analysis of failed states, especially if we separate *Foreign Policy's* flawed methodology from the more specific work of others. But since his *Foreign Affairs* article focused less (despite its title) on failed states theory than it did on the weaknesses and insouciant over-confidence of Washington's "forcible state-building" enterprise, there is much in it with which policy critics can agree.

Mazarr suggests that national security priority cases do not much feature on the Failed States Index. Few of its top twenty have geostrategic significance, or harbour terrorists. That presumably would be the main point for him of a more useful Index. It would recognize the most difficult cases – the countries serving their peoples least effectively and harbouring the possibility of al-Qaeda and other related terror – and thus enable policy makers to assist mostly those states to improve conditions internally in order to limit the likelihood of disaffection and outbreaks of civil conflict. But the Failed States Index was not designed to be diagnostic. Since it relies on subjective inputs rather than measurements capable of differentiating adequate providing nation-states from their failing brethren it cannot show the exact ways in which a polity is marginalizing some of its citizens, preying or discriminating against minorities (or majorities, as in Syria), or simply hoarding all state benefits for a ruling family or clan.

Moreover, by employing a statistically-based formula, weak and failed states may be evaluated using empirical evidence, thus providing the essence of what policy makers have long acted without. Such a formula could helpfully show how difficult, not how easy, state reconstruction would be. It should also reinforce Mazarr's rightful conclusion that "the path from state weakness to strength has to be travelled by the states themselves." Innovative reforms have to be owned internally, not implanted by well-intentioned outsiders. "Stuff happens", mostly bad, when citizens believe improvements are driven by a foreign agenda.

Understanding the dynamics of what leadership and governance decisions drive nation-states into failure from strength (e.g., Cote d'Ivoire) or weakness (South Sudan, Yemen, or – classically – Sierra Leone) is still important if we wish to make the world a better and safer place. But if we want only to combat terrorist outbreaks then, as Mazarr prefers, we can train local militaries, use our drones, employ helicopter-borne special forces to attack insurgents directly, and so on. But if we are also attempting to use American might and American altruistic energies to uplift peoples in under-performing countries and neighbourhoods, then a thoroughly nuanced appreciation of what causes a weak state to become a failed state or, how to recover such a state from failure, is still critical for policy making and policy understanding.

References

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