Failed States and Terrorism: Engaging the Conventional Wisdom

https://www.e-ir.info/2021/05/22/failed-states-and-terrorism-engaging-the-conventional-wisdom/

LUIGI PAOLI PUCCETTI, MAY 22 2021

Failing states have potentially favorable conditions which can facilitate the settlement of terrorist groups. However, the failure and the weakness of a country do not automatically entail the existence of a causal link with terrorism, nor are the failures and the weaknesses of a country sufficient conditions for the settlement of a transnational terrorist organization. Terrorist organizations could not have interests in establishing a base in failed and weak states. Further strategic and socio-cultural elements are necessary to understand the settlement of such organizations in both failed and weak states. The objective is to assess and review the enduring and controversial conventional wisdom that all failed states constitute safe havens for terrorists. The first paragraph will expose such conventional wisdom. The second paragraph will engage this issue through the study of the main works that have approached the subject so as to offer a proper view on the debate. This essay will concentrate its attention on international terrorism, rather than both domestic and international terrorism. The reason for this focus is that today there are numerous organizations and factions that are labelled as terrorist because of political reasons. Consequently, indication of domestic terrorism could be based on arbitrary motivations rather than objectives terms (Newman, 2007). Besides, domestic terrorism has become a widespread tactic in civil conflicts by both the governmental and insurgent parties (Coggins, 2015; Arsenault, Bacon, 2015). Therefore, it would appear more significant to pay attention just to transnational terrorism, given also the fact that the interest on such matters has gained traction with the 9/11 attacks perpetuated by an international terrorist group. International terrorism is defined as the use of indiscriminate violence against civilians and militaries for political purposes perpetuated by individuals or groups within foreign territories during both peace and war time (Sperotto, 2011; George, 2018).

The Conventional Wisdom on Failed States and Terrorism

In the Cold War aftermath, Western nations and international organizations considered failed states as a humanitarian matter because of the catastrophic political, social, human rights and economic conditions of these countries and their people. Situations changed after 9/11 and the beginning of the War on Terror when failed states were considered a top priority international security issue (Patrick, 2007).

The Afghanistan case become the paradigm of a deeply rooted conventional wisdom that the failed states constitute a safe haven for terrorists as the Al-Qaeda group and its leader, responsible for the 9/11 attacks, were settled in that country (Dorff, 2005). Such an assumption was also strengthened by the 9/11 Commission Report in which the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks identified the necessary conditions to carry out terrorism as inherent to failed states. For the Commission, the possibility to train personnel and acquire resources, weapons, and the necessary material is likely to occur in failed states, expressing concern for states such as Yemen and Pakistan as possible sources of further threats. That is why it strongly recommended the US government to set a security strategy to eradicate these sanctuaries in the remote areas of the globe (Innes, 2005). This assumption immediately spread across the globe as numerous countries and international organizations, including the United Nations and the European Union, set their agendas on failed states as a terrorist source (Hehir, 2007; Simon, Tucker, 2007).

The conventional wisdom is mainly based on the assumption that terrorist groups can take advantage of the anarchy and disorder reigning in the failed states. The possibility to exploit lawless states where the government is unable to

Failed States and Terrorism: Engaging the Conventional Wisdom
Written by Luigi Paoli Puccetti

exercise its authority by preventing and prosecuting terrorism would be an advantage for terrorist groups (Schneckener, 2004; Piazza, 2007). Terrorists would be free to carry out their activities undetected in a sort of a "black hole" which would assure them total impunity (Menkhaus, 2007; Korteweg, 2008).

Governments powerlessness as an indispensable element for terrorists to carry out their activities is declined in several ways. As state-failure is a complex phenomenon, every element that contributes to the collapse of a nation can give an assist to terrorist groups (Hehir, 2007). Lack of rule of law, corruption, poor social and economic conditions of the population, absence of economic control and regulations on the commercial activities, uncontrolled borders and territory provide an ideal environment for the terrorist groups. In such a context, terrorist cells can rise and grow, recruit and train personnel, acquire and invest resources in both legal and illegal activities, purchase weapons and vehicles, and set the foundations for eventually expanding its network in the region. Terrorists can exploit the political vacuum and the problems afflicting failed states society to put down roots, and exacerbate the divergence between people and the authority. Poverty and unemployment are exploited by terrorist groups to obtain favors and protection from the local people, offering money and employment. (Schneckener, 2004; Piazza, 2007; Tikuisis, 2009).

Finally, as failed and weak states conserve their formal sovereignty within their national boundaries, foreign powers cannot intervene in their territory against terrorists. Therefore, terrorist groups are protected both against external intervention due to the legal principle of non-interference and the failed states authority due to their weakness. The same sovereign powers allow failed states to grant passports and travelling documents that can be easily acquired by terrorist members thanks to the abovementioned corruption or other means. Terrorists can obtain these documents to travel and mask their real identities (Takeyh, Gvosdev, 2002). It is in these states that terrorist groups would have their safe havens and the necessary security to settle and grow, far away from the Western and the other states representing the operational field in which instead they implement their activity and the attacks (Arsenault, Bacon, 2015).

The aforementioned enabling elements have also brought to generally assert that there is even a causal link between state failure and terrorism. The failure of a state, with all its adverse political, social and economic consequences inevitably brings to resort to terrorism by their individuals and groups (Hehir, 2007). In response to this issue, the world community should be engaging the issue of the failed states with an ambitious state-building campaign by enhancing their economies, promoting democracy, and developing their governance capacity of these countries as argued, for example, by Fukuyama (2004). In other words, the conventional wisdom also generated a call to the international community to "fix" these states from their foundations and not neutralizing the terrorists (Hehir, 2007).

Reviewing the Conventional Wisdom

The relationship between failing states and terrorism has been the subject of numerous in-depth studies. Piazza and Tikuisis claim that there is a correlation between failed states and terrorism (Piazza, 2007; Tikuisis, 2009). Newman and Patrick note that the majority of failed and weak states do not have terrorist groups operating in their territory (Newman, 2007; Patrick, 2007). Coggins (2015) claims the same thing, arguing that just the states experiencing a total political collapse are more prone to promote the establishment of terrorist groups. George (2018) states that failed counties experience more terrorism but just when it is perpetrated by homebased people. Hehir (2007) instead claim that there is no real support to the argument that failed states generate and breed terrorism. However, he recognizes that the main terrorist organizations operate in failed states. As can be seen the views are different and there is no univocal answer to this issue. Still, there is a general consensus among the majority of these scholars that there is not causal link between state-failure and weakness and terrorism despite the fact that terrorists operate in failing and weak states (Newman, 2007; Hehir, 2007; Korteweg, 2008; Coggins 2015; George; 2018).

The adverse socio-economic conditions of these states do not directly result in the rise of terrorism. This conclusion is also supported by statistical data showing that the majority of the societies living in poverty or being afflicted of social and political problems of weak and failed states do not resort to terrorist violence (Abadie, 2006). Indeed, a considerable amount of international terrorists do not come from failed states, but instead from strong and rich countries (von Hippel, 2003; Newman, 2007; Simon, Tucker, 2007) The ISIS militants who hit Paris and Brussels

Failed States and Terrorism: Engaging the Conventional Wisdom
Written by Luigi Paoli Puccetti

between 2015 and 2016 respectively, also demonstrate how terrorists can come from Western states, while the Al-Qaeda commando responsible for the 9/11 attacks proves that terrorists can come from strong states, such as Saudi Arabia (von Hippel, 2003; Gerges, 2016).

As failed states do not necessarily give birth to terrorists, failed states are not inevitably terrorist lairs. Safe havens can also be the suburbs of rich and Western metropolis as the Jihadist cells have demonstrated with the Paris banlieues and the Brussels neighborhood of Molenbeek (Patrick, 2007; Gatti, 2019). Furthermore, failed states can be as attractive as challenging for terrorist cells willing to settle in their territories. The collapse and the anarchy of such states can damage the terrorist groups and be an obstacle for their activities.

The lack of infrastructure, logistic deficiencies, and the remoteness from potential targets represent demanding predicaments for transnational terrorist groups, as the failure of Al-Qaeda in moving men and materials in Somalia demonstrates. Criminality and insurgent groups of failed states can constitute an enemy of terrorist cells, jeopardizing their permanence in the territory. (Simon, Tucker, 2007; George, 2018).

The predicaments that can result from local enemies can be avoided through an alliance with local societies. Simon and Tucker, and Campana and Ducol emphasize this point, arguing that safe havens rely for the most part on the relationship between local people and terrorist cells rather than on the geographic features of the territory (Simon, Tucker, 2007; Campana, Ducol, 2011). The possibility to establish an alliance with local societies can be achieved when there is a meeting of interests, socio-cultural and religious affinity, and mutual advantages. Only if these conditions are met, terrorist groups can successfully settle (*Ibidem*). The necessity of local alliances allows to discharge the assumption of the conventional wisdom that terrorist organizations exploit anarchy. Such an assumption is based on a misperception that discharged the local governance models, believing that where there is not a recognized strong Weberian state authority, there is a power vacuum (Innes, 2007; Korteweg, 2008). Terrorist groups need a stable and functional form of governance to settle and carry out their activities. When Al-Qaeda moved to Afghanistan and Sudan it could exploit both the governments of those countries. Although both the Kabul and Khartoum regimes were not able to exercise strong governance over their lands, they were still able to provide advantages and protection to Bin Laden (Hehir, 2007). Besides, the conventional wisdom has ignored the fact that also strong states can endorse and host terrorist cells, such as in the case of Gaddafi's Libya in the '80s with the PLO (Korteweg, 2008).

Finally, as terrorist sanctuaries are established according to terrorists' interests and objectives it shall also be taken into account that the choice to settle in a given territory inevitably depends on their strategy and their objectives. Of course, not all the states offer the same possibility to terrorist cells to pursue their goals; terrorists will therefore seek to settle where they will be able to maximize their performance.

Conclusions

The assertion that all failed and weak states are sanctuaries for terrorism needs to be reconsidered. Not all the failed and weak countries host terrorist cells, despite the fact that they offer potential advantages and favorable conditions to those organizations hiding in these types of nations. It is up to these organizations to decide whether to establish in those countries according to their goals and their ability to gain the allegiance of local faction to be sheltered. It is possible to say that if a territory constitutes a safe haven depends on the terrorist strategy and what they need from the failed state territory. At the same time, the failure and the weakness of a state are not satisfactory conditions to the settlement of terrorists. The collapse of a state can be troubling for terrorist organizations instead of favor them. In light of such reassessment, the conventional wisdom should be drastically reduced. At the same time, further in-depth circumstances must be investigated to understand the rise of terrorists in failed states as there is not a proven causal link between the two elements. Terrorist groups have also risen in Western and be sponsored by strong states. Therefore, the study on the rise of terrorism goes beyond the sole link with failed states, accepting the fact that terrorists can rise anywhere without geographical limitations.

Bibliography

Failed States and Terrorism: Engaging the Conventional Wisdom
Written by Luigi Paoli Puccetti

Abadie, A. (2006). Poverty, Political Freedom, and the Roots of Terrorism, in The American Economic Review, 96(2), 50-56.

Arsenault, E. G., Bacon, T. (2015). Disaggregating and Defeating Terrorist Safe Havens, in Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 38(2), 85-112.

Byman, D. L. (2015). Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different goals, different targets, in Brookings Institute Website. Available in https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/comparing-al-qaeda-and-isis-different-goals-different-targets/ (Last visit: March 2021).

Campana, A., Ducol, B. (2011). Rethinking Terrorist Safe Havens: Beyond a State-Centric Approach, in Civil Wars, 13(4), 396-413.

Carter, D. (2012). A Blessing or a Curse? State Support for Terrorist Groups, in International Organization, 66(1), 129-151.

Coggins, B. L. (2015). Does State Failure Cause Terrorism? An Empirical Analysis (1999–2008), in Journal of Conflict Resolution, 59(3), 455–483.

Dorff, R. (2005). Failed States After 9/11: What Did We Know and What Have We Learned?, in International Studies Perspectives, 6(1), 20-34.

Fukuyama, F. (2004). The Imperative of State-Building, in Journal of Democracy, 15(1), 17-31. 1

Gatti, A. (2019). Urban Terrorist Sanctuaries in Europe: The Case of Molenbeek, In Pektas S. & Leman J. (Authors), Militant Jihadism: Today and Tomorrow. Leuven (Belgium): Leuven University Press. 151-176.

George, J. (2018). State Failure and Transnational Terrorism: An Empirical Analysis, in Journal of Conflict Resolution, 62(3), 471–495.

Gerges, F. (2016). ISIS: A history. Princeton, New Jersey; Oxford, England: Princeton University Press.

Hehir, A. (2007). The Myth of the Failed State and the War on Terror: A Challenge to the Conventional Wisdom, in Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, 1(3), 307-332.

Howard, T. (2010). Failed States and the Spread of Terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa, in Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 33(11), 960-988.

Innes, M. A. (2005). Terrorist Sanctuaries and Bosnia-Herzegovina: Challenging Conventional Assumptions, in Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 28(4), 295-305.

Innes, M. A. (2008). Deconstructing Political Orthodoxies on Insurgent and Terrorist Sanctuaries, in Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 31(3), 251-267.

Korteweg, R. (2008). Black Holes: On Terrorist Sanctuaries and Governmental Weakness, in Civil Wars, 10(1), 60-71.

Menkhaus, K. (2006). Quasi-States, Nation-Building, and Terrorist Safe Havens, in Journal of Conflict Studies, 23(2), 7-23.

Nay, O. (2013). Fragile and failed states: Critical perspectives on conceptual hybrids, in International Political Science Review, 34(3), 326–341.

Failed States and Terrorism: Engaging the Conventional Wisdom
Written by Luigi Paoli Puccetti

Newman, E. (2007). Weak States, State Failure, and Terrorism, in Terrorism and Political Violence, 19(4), 463-488.

Patrick, S. (2007). "Failed" States and Global Security: Empirical Questions and Policy Dilemmas, in International Studies Review, 9(4), 644-662.

Piazza, J. (2008). Incubators of Terror: Do Failed and Failing States Promote Transnational Terrorism?, in International Studies Quarterly, 52(3), 469-488.

Schneckener, U. (2004), How transnational terrorists profit from Fragile States, SWP Research Paper, Series 14.

Simons, A., Tucker, D. (2007). The misleading problem of failed states: A 'socio-geography' of terrorism in the post-9/11 era, in Third World Quarterly, 28(2), 387-401.

Stern, J. (2003). The Protean Enemy, in Foreign Affairs, 82(4), 27-40.

Sperotto, F. (2011). Combating international terrorism, in Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali, *78*(4), 541-551.

Takeyh, R., Gvosdev, N. (2002). Do terrorist networks need a home?, in The Washington Quarterly, 25(3), 97-108.

Tikuisis, P. (2009). On the relationship between weak states and terrorism, in Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, 1(1), 66-79.

von Hippel, K. (2003). Définir les origines du terrorisme : un débat transatlantique ?, in Revue internationale et stratégique, 3(3), 103-113.