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# The strategic threat of weak states: when reality calls theory into question

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Research that focuses on the failure of a state to fulfil its sovereign duties has met with resounding success since the end of the Cold War and in the aftermath of September 11 2001. One of the main theories proposed is that states deemed weak, or worse, failed, generate conflict. “Most of the security problems of Africa largely hang on the failure of the postcolonial state” (Buzan, Weaver, 2006 : 220). Strategic priority is given to these states, which are often a topic of discussion in the academic world. On February 23 2015, in *Foreign Policy*, Amy Zegart defined the United States’ interest in weak or failed states as “paranoia” that distracts the country from real threats to national security (Zegart, 2015)<sup>1</sup>. Before her, Barry Posen also called for a renewed look at the United States’ vital national security interests (Posen, 2014, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> For Amy Zegart, Pakistan is the only weak state that could pose a real challenge to American interests, which is not the case for the majority of the other states of this type.

The strategic aspect of this debate is fundamental. The 2013 French White Paper on Defence and National Security mentions this threat: “our forces must (...) be able to conduct long-term crisis control operations faced with threats arising from the existence of fragile or failed states” (French Ministry of Defence, 2013 : 85). However, the terms of the debate are more extensive and reveal a shift in perspectives: war is no longer a result of the power of a state but rather its weakness. Categorising “weak states” on a scale of fragility is therefore a way of describing and reflecting on international relations according to the efficiency of a state’s functions. As Pierre Bourdieu said: “(...) the social order, for its part, owes its permanence to the fact that it imposes classification structures that, being adjusted to objective classifications, produce a sort of recognition of that order, which implies ignorance of the arbitrary nature of its basis (...)” (Bourdieu, 1981 : 69)<sup>2</sup>. The concept of a failed state affects how international relations are understood which in turn influences action. This research paper attempts to explain how the threat posed by weak or failed states has been overestimated. To do so, we must return to the definition of these states characterised by their level of failure and the utility of classifying states. The paper shall explain why the connection between the weakness of a state and terrorism appears limited. Lastly, it will deal with the operational challenges of this concept, namely those concerned with state-building, often presented as a “solution” to a failed state.

### **“Failed states” in the American counter-terrorism plan**

The idea that failed states could become a sanctuary for terrorists is commonly upheld. The emergence of the terrorist organisation known as the Islamic State (or DAESH) would appear to have confirmed this theory. The portrayal of these states as a major threat goes back to Afghanistan, where Osama Bin Laden prepared the attacks of September 11 2001. It was therefore of vital importance to the United States to eradicate these hotbeds of terrorism, which were home to an enemy that had struck their national territory, and establish a stable friendly regime. This interest was shared by the allies, though their national territories had not been directly affected, but it was considered a possibility that this enemy was likely to also strike other states seen as “Western”. Consequently, as they could directly attack this enemy, the United States had to combat the allies of the organisation, which were strong, authoritarian states defined as “rogue states”. States seen to be vulnerable and susceptible to influence were also targeted. In 2002, the National Security Strategy warned: “The events of September 11 2001 taught us that weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states” (The White House, 2002 : 4). Since then, Afghanistan became a metaphor referred to in other regions of the world affected by the development of terrorist hotbeds. For example, references are made to “Sahelistan” and even “Bokostan”. Weak and failed states are supposedly fertile ground for the blossoming of terrorist groups and incubators for factors of destabilisation, posing a direct threat to Western states in a globalised world. This causality between the weakness of a state and its threat potential is now established, and is still referred to fifteen years later, in the various national white papers. The latest U.S. National Security Strategy evokes weak and failed states as a priority: “(...) we will prioritise efforts that address the top strategic risks to our interests: (...) significant security consequences

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<sup>2</sup> Translated from the French.

associated with weak or failed states" (The White House, 2015 : 2). Before questioning this link between a state's weakness and terrorism, we must retrace the history of the concept of a failed state.

The 'failed state' concept refers to an entity whose governmental structures have failed. Originating in the United States, the research conducted on failed states in the middle of the 1990s and during the Bill Clinton administration, were mainly approached from a humanitarian point of view. This notion appeared for the first time in 1992, in *Foreign Policy* magazine, and Madeleine Albright made it popular by referring to it when the American troops were deployed in Somalia. The following year, the CIA commissioned a group of academics to research the issue, today known as the Political Instability Task Force. The United Nations (UN) treated it as an area of concern in 2005. From the academic standpoint, Gerald Helman and Steven Ratner were the first analysts to use the term "failed state". William Zartman, in his book *Collapsed States, The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority*, studies the notion of collapsed states, although it is more so a study of "failed states". Lastly, Jean-Germain Gros describes what characterises a "successful" state. His work was strongly criticised by Jennifer Milliken and Keith Kraus, for the arbitrary nature and ethnocentrism of his research. After a relative eclipse, the notion returned after 2001, legitimated by Robert Rotberg who created the Failed State Index, published annually by *Foreign Policy* magazine.<sup>3</sup> Today, "weak" or "failed" states are at the centre of U.S. national security interests in the war against terrorism. Afghanistan, Somalia, Mali, Libya, Syrie and Yemen are classed as "failed states" that pose a threat to the stability of other states. It has also become a key issue in the United Nations and in Europe (Daviron, Giordano, 2007 : 23-41).

According to the American classification developed by Robert Rotberg, there are four types of states. It classifies each state according to its degree of stability: firstly, the "strong" state, applicable to the majority of Western countries. This is the opposite of a weak state, and is the ideal. The responsibility of the strong state is therefore to ensure weak states do not become failed states. Weak states can then be divided into two categories: those in a permanent situation of vulnerability, due to the climate, geography, specific economic constraints such as the lack of raw materials, etc. They maintain unstable equilibrium, with no national, religious or cultural unity and are led by authoritarian powers. The other sub-category concerns states in a temporary situation of fragility due to internal social or political opposition or cross-border conflict, with fertile ground for the emergence of irredentist movements. The third category of states is that of failed states; these are states that are already in a state of decline. The government no longer controls the land, and the country is gradually taken over by non-state actors. The state can no longer provide a secure environment for the population. A final category is sometimes mentioned, that of a "collapsed state", which is the most critical situation with a lack of any structured power or authority. A collapsed state is a failed state that has reached its peak.

The number of weak, fragile or collapsed states is difficult to account for, and the classification differs according to indicators. The Fund for Peace publishes a yearly index of failed states in the world,

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<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to R. Rothberg and his influence on the development of this notion and its success, see: V. Chapaux, 2008, "Réussite, fragilité, faillite : les états de l'État dans les discours politiques et les discours 'experts'", Association belge francophone de science politique, *Draft*, p.9-14.

along with Foreign Policy magazine. This index assesses states according to twelve indicators: four social, two economic, and six political and military indicators<sup>4</sup>. The classification of these states can sometimes appear illogical. Noam Chomsky has shown that the notion of failed state is so vague that even the United States could be considered a failed state (Chomsky, 2006). One observation cannot be overlooked: while sub-Saharan African countries are over-represented, this type of state can be found in every region of the world. In the 2014 index, South Sudan (1<sup>st</sup>) was ranked next to Afghanistan (7<sup>th</sup>), Yemen (8<sup>th</sup>), Haiti (9<sup>th</sup>) and Pakistan (10<sup>th</sup>).

This classification of states is extremely limited in its approach.

### **The limits of the classification approach**

There are numerous studies that criticise this typology, stressing the lack of scientism in the chosen indicators. Others question the development of this concept in the context of the start of the “war on terrorism” following September 11 2001 and the creation of a new factor influencing how international relations are perceived. However, much less research has been carried out on the reasons why these states have failed and therefore the uniqueness of each situation, which disqualifies de facto the classification system used.

The lack of consensus on its definition and the grounded indicators recognised and approved by the international community have not helped in providing an explanation for the failure of a state, and few research programmes have been launched on the topic. In fact, the research that has been done discusses the poor qualification given to these states and questions the existence of these categories. There are few examples of research carried out on the causes of their failure. The University of Maryland’s State Failure Task Force has shown that the kind of regime in power was the best predictor of state failure. Strangely, authors have observed that the likelihood of a state failing is seven times higher for partial democracies than for full-fledged democracies or autocracies. A poor level of material well-being, a lack of economic openness, regional conflict (“bad neighbourhood” syndrome) and internal conflict are some of the factors that predispose a state to failing.

The manner in which states are classed is to be reconsidered. The demise of a state is detrimental, but it can also be a response to its failing, in the sense that new states are formed. Of course, this is not always the case. Several former Yugoslavian states have stability issues, that can sometimes be existential (Montenegro, Macedonia, Kosovo). We must therefore identify several types or several degrees of state failure. Based on this, we could argue that it is better to rationalise each failure in terms of a specific situation, rather than by placing it in a category. The category of “failed state” is not homogenous, and is merely a superficial portrayal.

Furthermore, the development of this approach by classification of the state should not be analysed without taking the international context into perspective. Morten Bøås and Kathleen Jennings

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<sup>4</sup> This methodology is subject to debate: A. Hehir, 2007, “The Myth of the Failed State and the War on Terror: A Challenge to the Conventional Wisdom”, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol.1, no.3, p.312-314.

pointed to the coinciding of the development of this approach with the launch of the global war on terror after September 11 2001 (Morten, Jennings, 2005 : 385-395). Failed states were designated a major source of risk in the 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy and became the focus of a specific prevention and assistance strategy in the U.S. State Department in 2005. For the U.N., this type of state raises the issue of the responsibility to protect populations (“R2P”) and justifies interventions to keep the peace when local authorities are unable to do so. The “failed state rhetoric” could be said to be a tool used to legitimize interventions in the name of international security.

Additionally, this failed state approach fosters a new interpretation of international relations. The state is deemed powerless and dominated by organised transnational criminality, or according to another interpretation, it becomes criminalised itself by privatising its markets. Predation is said to be at the core of the state’s rationale. An empirical study of this approach shows the shortcomings of such a notion. Few “weak” states are truly sinking into violence, and states not classified as weak can also be faced with instability. Indeed, this concept is based on a normative, substantialist view of the state, based on the modern Western state model that is centralised and bureaucratised, in which it is possible to establish a clear difference between criminal and political violence. However, the “failed state rhetoric” posits that there are “successful” states that follow the Western model and which are in contrast with the failing states (Dorff, 2000).<sup>5</sup>

## **Questioning the correlation between the weakness of a state and the development of terrorism**

It is commonly accepted that a state’s weakness is fertile ground for terrorist groups to set up or develop. However, Aidan Hehir has shown that there is no correlation between the ranking of a state on the Failed State Index and the number of terrorist organisations established on its territory (Hehir, 2007 : 307-332). For example, India is ranked low on the Failed State Index but is presumed to be home to a large number of these groups. However, the only terrorist group listed for Somalia is Al-Shabaab, affiliated with Al-Qaeda, and it only really appeared in 2006. If failed states are deemed to be fertile ground for the emergence (or the host country) of terrorist groups, empirically speaking this hypothesis cannot be verified and raises the question of the reality of the threat.

Other conditions are also favourable to the emergence of terrorism in a state. Bridget Coggins showed that the majority of weak or failed states are not predisposed to becoming hotbeds of terrorism. However, according to Coggins, a link can be established between certain state failures – political collapse and corruption in particular – and the production of terrorism. Terrorism, therefore, is more likely to emerge or to be produced by states where failure is caused by violent political instability. However, states affected by extreme human insecurity would therefore be less likely to experience this phenomenon (Coggins, 2014 : 455-483).

Coggins also shows that, counter-intuitively, there could be a correlation between a state’s improved position on the human development index and the emergence of terrorism. Nonetheless, there is a consensus that has formed that wrongly considers that a deterioration in socio-economic conditions

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<sup>5</sup> To avoid confusion, Dorff proposes the term “failing state” instead of “failed state”.

creates fertile ground for the development of Islamic terrorism. In 2004, according to the UN: “we know all too well that the biggest security threats we face now, and in the decades ahead, go far beyond States waging aggressive war. They extend to poverty, infectious disease and environmental degradation; war and violence within States; the spread and possible use of nuclear, radiological, chemical and biological weapons; terrorism; and transnational organized crime. The threats are from non-State actors as well as States, and to human security as well as State security” (United Nations Secretary-General, 2004 : 9). Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahri often used this argument to show that apostate regimes were responsible for the socio-economic problems of Muslim populations: “This is a continent with many potential advantages, and exploiting this potential will greatly advance the jihad. It will promote achieving the expected targets of Jihad. Africa is a fertile soil for the advance of jihad and the jihadi cause”<sup>6</sup>. If there was a causal link between poverty and terrorism, it does not explain why the African continent was struck much later by terrorist attacks. Academics have shown that political repression and religious indoctrination have been the most certain causes of terrorism and extremism.

Finally, this approach completely disregards the fact that the lack of government and the availability of weapons are security risks that allow foreign combatants to set up in a country; the failure of Osama bin Laden's envoys in Somalia in the early 1990s is proof alone of this fact. Furthermore, the majority of terrorist attacks have local or regional targets. The weakest states have not produced the greatest number or the most dangerous terrorist groups. The attacks in France in January 2015 were carried out by terrorists who were born, brought up and became partly radicalised in France, even though France is ranked 160<sup>th</sup> out of 178 in the Foreign Policy Fragile States Index.

### **The practical impact of the consensus that associates a state’s weakness with threat**

In 2006, while he was Director of Policy Planning at the State Department, Stephen Krasner gave the concept of failed state a purpose in operations.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the notion of “failed state” undermines one of the foundations of the international system: a state’s sovereignty. This is one of the key elements, as it allows interference in the domestic affairs of a state if its government model is considered weak. The main strategy proposed in response to a state’s failure is “state-building”.

State-building is “the need to restore political units wherein structure, authority, law and political order have become unstable, namely following a civil war” (Battistella, Petiteville, Smouts, Vennesson, 2012 : 527), and goes as far as describing those states has having failed or collapsed. This strategy involves the development of international regulatory mechanisms that are designed to

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<sup>6</sup> A.A. Al-Ansari, “Echo of Jihad” (Sada al-Jihad), cited by J. P. Pham, 2007, “Africa Command A Historic Opportunity for Enhanced Engagement—If Done Right”, Hearing before the United States House of Representatives - Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health.

<sup>7</sup> In an article published in October 2014, S. D. Krasner rejects the idea that failed states are safehouses for terrorists, while in 2006 he fully backed the idea. The same day, J. Logan et C. Preble expressed their delight at seeing him change his analysis. See: Krasner S. D., Risse T., 2014, “Well-governed failed states ? Not an oxymoron!”, *The Washington Post* and J. Logan and C. Preble, 2014, “The birth and perhaps death of anxiety about failed states”, *The Washington Post*.

restore sovereignty to states that are failing or collapsing. The notion of state-building is often associated with other similar concepts, such as peace-building, nation-building and democracy-building. State-building is historically a long procedure, and the strategy chosen by the international community is therefore to come up with a Weberian state model in a shorter timeframe, avoiding the long period of conflict that generally accompanies the development process.

There is no shortage of critics of the notion of state-building. David Chandler, for example, likens it to a return to Western civilising missions, a position shared by Francis Fukuyama, doctrinarian of state-building as a new form of governance. For David Chandler, however, state-building has done more to destroy the institutional assets of a state rather than rebuild them. Worse still, he believes state-building has created a culture of dependency, instead of autonomous local institutions. Marina Ottaway also questions the efficiency of this strategy, pointing out that the international community has drawn up a list of guidelines to rebuild a state, but it is so long it is impossible to apply it in the field (Ottaway, 2003 : 252). The other problem raised by this approach is that it disqualifies the actors that do not correspond to the Weberian vision of the state, or even policy. They are then left out of the state-building or rebuilding process, which threatens conflict resolution. The very role that an international organisation should play is controversial. Edward Luttwak has shown that minor conflict should be allowed to continue without external intervention, which would end it prematurely. On the contrary, external intervention tends to prolong a conflict situation. This analysis is shared by Jeffrey Herbst, who believes international organisations persistently want to rebuild collapsed states in the same conditions that existed prior to its collapse, so that in the end they just prolong a state of collapse rather than accept the existence of the new political order it created.

## Conclusion

This strategic research paper shows that fragile or failed states can be a threat to their environment and raise many challenges. However, the generally accepted analysis that describes these states or the consequences of their fragility as factors that could destabilise the national interests of Western states must be looked at in context. It has become commonplace in political and sometimes academic discourse to present fragile or failed states as a threat to our interests, at the risk of seeing words influence reality and producing an inappropriate response. The complexity and diversity of state failure make it impossible to create a reliable typology or correlate it with the development of threat such as terrorism. The connection between fragility, state failure and terrorism is supported by far too weak a basis to make the fragility of a state a strategic priority. "Strong" states can still be a threat to the stability of the international system, as the recent invasion of part of Ukraine by Russia has proven, or Chinese provocation in South East Asia. The poorly channelled power of a state is a threat with far greater systemic consequences than the lack of capacity of these so-called fragile states.

This strategic research paper has put forward several possibilities for more advanced scientific study. Firstly, the analysis of the failed state brings us to reflect on the idea proposed by Emmanuel Terray, that "what is in crisis, is perhaps first and foremost the arsenal of concepts and systems through

which we attempt to grasp this moving and multifaceted reality that is the contemporary state” (Terray, 1986 : 19). We may raise the question: is it the states that are failing, or rather the “state” as a way of organising society in certain regions? It was only recently that researchers attempted to understand the political order of these so-called failed states, without highlighting the absence of a “state” but taking into account what actually exists. This research should be pursued (Clements, Boege, Brown, Foley, Nolan, 2007 : 45-56). Similarly, we must change our perspective in studying the fragility of a state. The analysis could question the influence of the international system in a state's failure (for example, economic and political interventionism). This would involve understanding how the rise of terrorism can sometimes be a response to the “war on terror” and therefore cannot be used to justify the latter. The impact of the likely end of the U.S. liberal hegemony strategy on American policy towards fragile or failed states could be a new avenue for research. Lastly, we should focus on what we can observe in the international relations in a region when counter-terrorism combat is imported by local actors.



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