Failed States
in a World of Terror

Robert I. Rotberg

THE ROAD TO HELL

In the wake of September 11, the threat of terrorism has given the problem of failed nation-states an immediacy and importance that transcends its previous humanitarian dimension. Since the early 1990s, wars in and among failed states have killed about eight million people, most of them civilians, and displaced another four million. The number of those impoverished, malnourished, and deprived of fundamental needs such as security, health care, and education has totaled in the hundreds of millions.

Although the phenomenon of state failure is not new, it has become much more relevant and worrying than ever before. In less interconnected eras, state weakness could be isolated and kept distant. Failure had fewer implications for peace and security. Now, these states pose dangers not only to themselves and their neighbors but also to peoples around the globe. Preventing states from failing, and resuscitating those that do fail, are thus strategic and moral imperatives.

But failed states are not homogeneous. The nature of state failure varies from place to place, sometimes dramatically. Failure and weakness can flow from a nation’s geographical, physical, historical, and

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political circumstances, such as colonial errors and Cold War policy mistakes. More than structural or institutional weaknesses, human agency is also culpable, usually in a fatal way. Destructive decisions by individual leaders have almost always paved the way to state failure. President Mobutu Sese Seko's three-plus decades of kleptocratic rule sucked Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo, or DRC) dry until he was deposed in 1997. In Sierra Leone, President Siaka Stevens (1967–85) systematically plundered his tiny country and instrumentalized disorder. President Mohamed Siad Barre (1969–91) did the same in Somalia. These rulers were personally greedy, but as predatory patrimonialists they also licensed and sponsored the avarice of others, thus preordaining the destruction of their states.

Today's failed states, such as Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, and Somalia, are incapable of projecting power and asserting authority within their own borders, leaving their territories governmentally empty. This outcome is troubling to world order, especially to an international system that demands—indeed, counts on—a state's capacity to govern its space. Failed states have come to be feared as "breeding grounds of instability, mass migration, and murder" (in the words of political scientist Stephen Walt), as well as reservoirs and exporters of terror. The existence of these kinds of countries, and the instability that they harbor, not only threatens the lives and livelihoods of their own peoples but endangers world peace.

**Into the Abyss**

The road to state failure is marked by several revealing signposts. On the economic side, living standards deteriorate rapidly as elites deliver financial rewards only to favored families, clans, or small groups. Foreign-exchange shortages provoke food and fuel scarcities and curtail government spending on essential services and political goods; accordingly, citizens see their medical, educational, and logistical entitlements melt away. Corruption flourishes as ruling cadres systematically skim the few resources available and stash their ill-gotten gains in hard-to-trace foreign bank accounts.

On the political side, leaders and their associates subvert prevailing democratic norms, coerce legislatures and bureaucracies into
subservience, strangle judicial independence, block civil society, and gain control over security and defense forces. They usually patronize an ethnic group, clan, class, or kin. Other groups feel excluded or discriminated against, as was the case in Somalia and Sierra Leone in the 1970s and 1980s. Governments that once appeared to operate for the benefit of all the nation’s citizens are perceived to have become partisan.

As these two paths converge, the state provides fewer and fewer services. Overall, ordinary citizens become poorer as their rulers become visibly wealthier. People feel preyed upon by the regime and its agents—often underpaid civil servants, police officers, and soldiers fending for themselves. Security, the most important political good, vanishes. Citizens, especially those who have known more prosperous and democratic times, increasingly feel that they exist solely to satisfy the power lust and financial greed of those in power. Meanwhile, corrupt despots drive grandly down city boulevards in motorcades, commandeer commercial aircraft for foreign excursions, and put their faces prominently on the local currency and on oversize photographs in public places. President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, for example, purchased 19 expensively armored limousines for his own motorcade before his reelection earlier this year.
In the last phase of failure, the state’s legitimacy crumbles. Lacking meaningful or realistic democratic means of redress, protesters take to the streets or mobilize along ethnic, religious, or linguistic lines. Because small arms and even more formidable weapons are cheap and easy to find, because historical grievances are readily remembered or manufactured, and because the spoils of separation, autonomy, or a total takeover are attractive, the potential for violent conflict grows exponentially as the state’s power and legitimacy recede.

If preventive diplomacy, conflict resolution, or external intervention cannot arrest this process of disaffection and mutual antagonism, the state at risk can collapse completely (Somalia), break down and be sundered (Angola, the DRC, and Sudan), or plunge into civil war (Afghanistan and Liberia). The state may also lapse and then be restored to various degrees of health by the UN (Bosnia and Cambodia), a regional or subregional organization (Sierra Leone and Liberia), or a well-intentioned or hegemonic outside power (Syria in Lebanon, Russia in Tajikistan). A former colonial territory such as East Timor can be brought back to life by the efforts and cash infusions of a UN-run transitional administration.

**LAW AND ORDER**

State failure threatens global stability because national governments have become the primary building blocks of order. International security relies on states to protect against chaos at home and limit the cancerous spread of anarchy beyond their borders and throughout the world. States exist to deliver political (i.e., public) goods to their inhabitants. When they function as they ideally should, they mediate between the constraints and challenges of the international arena and the dynamic forces of their own internal economic, political, and social realities.

The new concern over state failure notwithstanding, strong, effective states are more numerous now than before 1914. This shift occurred after the collapse of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, continued with the demise of colonialism in Africa and Asia, and concluded with the implosion of the Soviet Union. In 1914, 55 polities could be considered members of the global system;
in 1960, there were 90 such states. After the Cold War, that number climbed to 192. But given the explosion in the number of states—so many of which are small, resource-deprived, geographically disadvantaged, and poor—it is no wonder that numerous states are at risk of failure.

States are not created equal. Their sizes and shapes, their human endowments, their capacity for delivering services, and their leadership capabilities vary enormously. More is required of the modern state, too, than ever before. Each is expected to provide good governance; to make its people secure, prosperous, healthy, and literate; and to instill a sense of national pride. States also exist to deliver political goods—i.e., services and benefits that the private sector is usually less able to provide. Foremost is the provision of national and individual security and public order. That promise includes security of property and inviolable contracts (both of which are grounded in an enforceable code of laws), an independent judiciary, and other methods of accountability. A second but vital political good is the provision, organization, and regulation of logistical and communications infrastructures. A nation without well-maintained arteries of commerce and information serves its citizens poorly. Finally, a state helps provide basic medical care and education, social services, a social safety net, regulation and supply of water and energy, and environmental protection. When governments refuse to or cannot provide such services to all of their citizens, failure looms.

But not all of the states that fit this general profile fail. Some rush to the brink of failure, totter at the abyss, remain fragile, but survive. Weakness is endemic in many developing nations—the halfway house between strength and failure. Some weak states, such as Chad and Kyrgyzstan (and even once-mighty Russia), exhibit several of the defining characteristics of failed states and yet do not fail. Others, such as Zimbabwe, may slide rapidly from comparative strength to the very edge of failure. A few, such as Sri Lanka and Colombia, may suffer from vicious, enduring civil wars without ever failing, while remaining weak and susceptible to failure. Some, such as Tajikistan,
have retrieved themselves from possible collapse (sometimes with outside help) and remain shaky and vulnerable, but they no longer can be termed “failed.” Thus it is important to ask what separates strong from weak states, and weak states from failed states. What defines the phenomenon of failure?

THE ESSENCE OF FAILURE

Strong states control their territories and deliver a high order of political goods to their citizens. They perform well according to standard indicators such as per capita GDP, the UN’s Human Development Index, Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index, and Freedom House’s Freedom in the World report. Strong states offer high levels of security from political and criminal violence, ensure political freedom and civil liberties, and create environments conducive to the growth of economic opportunity. They are places of peace and order.

In contrast, failed states are tense, conflicted, and dangerous. They generally share the following characteristics: a rise in criminal and political violence; a loss of control over their borders; rising ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural hostilities; civil war; the use of terror against their own citizens; weak institutions; a deteriorated or insufficient infrastructure; an inability to collect taxes without undue coercion; high levels of corruption; a collapsed health system; rising levels of infant mortality and declining life expectancy; the end of regular schooling opportunities; declining levels of GDP per capita; escalating inflation; a widespread preference for non-national currencies; and basic food shortages, leading to starvation.

Failed states also face rising attacks on their fundamental legitimacy. As a state’s capacity weakens and its rulers work exclusively for themselves, key interest groups show less and less loyalty to the state. The people’s sense of political community vanishes and citizens feel disenfranchised and marginalized. The social contract that binds citizens and central structures is forfeit. Perhaps already divided by sectional differences and animosity, citizens transfer their allegiances to communal warlords. Domestic anarchy sets in. The rise of terrorist groups becomes more likely.
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Seven failed states exist today: Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, the DRC, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Sudan. They each exhibit most, if not all, of the traits listed above. Internal hot wars are also a leading indicator of failure, but failure usually precedes the outbreak of war. Hence, the extent of internecine antagonisms and how they are handled are important predictors of failure. Likewise, the nature of the rulers’ approach toward minorities, working classes, and other weak or marginalized peoples is indicative.

Among today’s failed states, Angola and Sudan have oil wealth, and Angola, the DRC, and Sierra Leone boast diamonds and other mineral resources. But all four countries’ governments, as well as those of Afghanistan, Burundi, and Liberia, share a common feature: they deliver security in limited quantities and across circumscribed areas. Moreover, their per capita GDP rates are very low, life expectancies are declining, and basic governmental services are lacking. In each case, the ruling regime projects little power. Each confronts ongoing civil strife, a proliferation of substate authorities, porous borders, high rates of civilian casualties, and a challenge to the regime’s intrinsic legitimacy by competing internal forces. Utter collapse is possible in each case, as is dismemberment, outside tutelage, or an interim assumption of UN control. All remain on the humanitarian watch list as potent sources of displaced persons and refugees. (Sierra Leone, however, has recently established a rudimentary government and has quieted its civil war with the assistance of 17,000 British and UN soldiers. But it was a collapsed state from the late 1990s until 2000.)

**TOTAL COLLAPSE**

Truly collapsed states, a rare and extreme version of a failed state, are typified by an absence of authority. Indeed, a collapsed state is a shell of a polity. Somalia is the model of a collapsed state: a geographical expression only, with borders but with no effective way to exert authority within those borders. Substate actors have taken
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over. The central government has been divided up, replaced by a functioning, unrecognized state called Somaliland in the north and a less well defined, putative state called Punt in the northeast. In the rump of the old Somalia, a transitional national government has emerged thanks to outside support. But it has so far been unable to project its power even locally against the several warlords who control sections of Mogadishu and large swaths of the countryside. Private entrepreneurialism has displaced the central provision of political goods. Yet life somehow continues, even under conditions of unhealthy, dangerous chaos.

An example of a once-collapsed state is Lebanon, which had disintegrated before Syria's intervention in 1990 provided security and gave a sense of governmental legitimacy to the shell of the state. Lebanon today qualifies as a weak, rather than failed, polity because its government is credible, civil war is absent, and political goods are being provided in significant quantities and quality. Syria provides the security blanket, denies fractious warlords the freedom to aggrandize themselves, and mandates that the usually antagonistic Muslim and Christian communities cooperate. The fear of being attacked preemptively by rivals, or of losing control of critical resources, is alleviated by Syria's imposed hegemony. Within that framework of security, the Lebanese people's traditional entrepreneurial spirit has transformed a failed state into a much stronger one.

THE ART OF PREVENTION

Experience suggests that the prevention of state failure depends almost entirely on a scarce commodity: international political will. In part, prevention relies on outsiders' recognizing early that a state's internal turmoil has the potential to be fatally destructive. That recognition should be accompanied by subregional, regional, and UN overtures, followed, if required, by private remonstrations—that is, quiet diplomacy. If such entreaties have little effect, there will be a need for public criticism by donor countries, international agencies, the UN, and regional groupings such as the European Union (EU) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. These entities
should also cease economic assistance, impose “smart sanctions,”
ban international travel by miscreant leaders, and freeze their
overseas accounts—much as the EU and the United States did to
Mugabe and his cohort in February. Furthermore, misbehaving
nations should be suspended from international organizations. In
retrospect, if the international community had more effectively
shunned Siad Barre, Mobutu, Idi Amin of Uganda, or Sani
Abacha of Nigeria, it might have helped to minimize the destruction
of their states. Ostracizing such strongmen and publicly criticizing
their rogue states would also reduce the necessity for any subsequent
UN peacekeeping and relief missions.

Zimbabwe is an instructive case. Two years ago, Mugabe began
employing state-sponsored violence to harass opponents and intimidate
voters during the runup to parliamentary elections. But South Africa
and the other members of the Southern African Development Com-
munity (SADC) refrained from public criticism of Zimbabwe. The EU
and the United States expressed displeasure at Mugabe’s tactics of
terror but likewise decided that constructive
engagement would be more effective than an
open rebuke. As brutally as Mugabe was
acting, outsiders believed that Zim-
babwe’s despot could be persuaded
to behave more responsibly.

Instead, Mugabe set about
destroying the economic and
political fabric of his country.
Zimbabwe, once unquestionably secure, economically
strong, socially advanced, and successfully modern, has
plummeted rapidly toward
failure—mimicking Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s,
Burma from the 1960s onward, and the DRC, Liberia, Nigeria,
and Sierra Leone in the
1990s. In the last several years,
Zimbabwe’s per capita GDP has fallen annually by 10 percent, while HIV infection rates have climbed to nearly 30 percent. Two thousand Zimbabweans die of AIDS each week. Life expectancy has dropped from 60 to 40 years, while annual inflation has increased from 40 to 116 percent. Corruption has become blatant. The central government no longer effectively provides fundamental political goods such as personal security, schooling, and medical facilities and treatment. Public order has broken down. This year many Zimbabweans may starve due to extremely serious food shortages, and fuel supplies are dwindling. Political institutions have ceased to function fully. Sizable sectional, ethnic, and linguistic fissures exist, and disaffection is everywhere. Even though the state remains intact, the government’s legitimacy is now seriously challenged.

By the time of the presidential election in March, therefore, Mugabe had already driven his country to the very edge of failure. Observers, especially South Africa and its neighbors, focused on the election as a way to remove him, provided it were free and fair. But Mugabe persistently refused to play by the common rules of democratic contests. Ahead of the election, he escalated violence against his opponents and anyone who failed to obey him and his ruling party. He unleashed a wave of thugs against the opposition and white farmers. He bombed independent newspapers and tried to jail their editors. He packed the nation’s supreme court and refused to carry out its rulings when it still failed to toe the line. Meanwhile, Zimbabwe’s neighbors, its major overseas friends and trading partners, and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan continued to try to bring about change through quiet diplomacy. But Mugabe ignored New York, London, Washington, and Brussels. He thumbed his nose at President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, reneging on solemn promises about fair play, the rule of law, and respect for free speech and media freedom.

Very belatedly, on the eve of the election, the EU and the United States finally turned firm and imposed sanctions. But it was too late, well past the many opportunities for South Africa, the SADC, the
United States, and the EU to isolate Mugabe. Ostracizing Mugabe and his close colleagues much earlier in 2001, through gradually escalating smart sanctions, might have led to freer and fairer elections in 2002 and helped to level the playing field. At the very least, international public criticism of Mugabe’s tactics might have helped to encourage the growth of civil society in Zimbabwe. But Mbeki’s trenchant criticisms were hesitant and muted. And South Africa, the regional superpower, did not threaten to cut off Zimbabwe’s supplies of electric power and petroleum. No one in the West or in Africa effectively warned Mugabe that attacking one’s own people, destroying a state, and stealing an election were impermissible.

GETTING NATION BUILDING RIGHT

If, as in Zimbabwe’s case, preventive diplomacy, targeted financial assistance, and other methods of stanching failure prove unsuccessful and a weak state actually fails, earnest efforts at reconstruction are required. President George W. Bush might still dread “nation building,” but the United States should support such efforts fully in the cases of Afghanistan, Burundi, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Sudan—indeed, wherever terror can easily find a home.

The examples of Tajikistan and Lebanon suggest that failed states can be helped to recover. Even the seemingly hopeless cases, such as Somalia, are not irredeemable. Likewise, the accomplishments of the UN transitional administrations in Cambodia and East Timor, as well as the NATO-UN interim administration in Kosovo, indicate that nation building is possible if there is sufficient political will and targeted external assistance.

In each of the last three cases mentioned above, an international interim administration provided security and developed a rudimentary local police force, patiently trained local administrators across departments, reintroduced legal codes and methods, and helped to rejuvenate and regularize existing economies. The transitional government eventually registered voters and sponsored internationally guaranteed expressions of political choice through the ballot box, thus leading all three countries out of a state of tutelage toward home rule and independence. But in each instance the interim government has been
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anxious to do its job and leave. Short-term fixes and quick reconstruction efforts were imperative for those who funded the interim administrations. Yet sustainable nation building demands more than a quick fix. It requires a long-term commitment by outsiders to building capacities, strengthening security, and developing human resources. The uncomfortable but necessary lesson of these partially effective attempts is that the revival of failed states will prove more successful if a regional or international organization takes charge and only very gradually relinquishes authority to an indigenous transitional administration.

A lasting cease-fire must be achieved as the first step in healing a failed state. It is then essential to disarm and demobilize combatants—a key step that was unfortunately omitted in Somalia in 1993. The ex-combatants should be provided, if possible, with jobs or plots of arable land as a way to reintegrate them into society. Collecting and destroying the weapons of ex-combatants, as Mozambique has accomplished, is also critical. So is the discovery and disposal of land mines, which remain strewn across the landscape in Afghanistan, Angola, Mozambique, and Sierra Leone.

A few thousand peacekeepers in Kabul alone will hardly pacify Afghanistan.

peacekeepers. As mentioned above, the large number of UN troops in Sierra Leone finally restored safety in that failed state in early 2002. That lesson should be applied to Afghanistan, a country with a terrible history of lawlessness and infamous levels of insecurity. A few thousand international peacekeepers in Kabul alone will hardly pacify the entire country. A well-disciplined force more along the lines of NATO’s operations in Kosovo, or the UN battalions in Sierra Leone, remains critical.

Afghanistan is the international community’s greatest challenge. Without a return to law and order, no transitional administration can hope to produce an atmosphere conducive to resuscitation. But once stability and confidence have been at least partially restored, the transitional administration and international agencies can together focus on four primary and parallel objectives: jump-starting the economy,
restoring the rule of law, re-creating political institutions, and rejuvenating civil society. The fundamental economic requirements also include establishing fiscal and macroeconomic stability, paying civil servants and police officers, and creating jobs. Without those accomplishments, a new probity, and a sense of coming prosperity, the local economy will languish and continue to rely on opium exports for cash. Crucial foreign investment, as well as aid from developed-world donors, will be conspicuously absent.

Reintroducing the rule of law can be done in stages, over time, but citizens will not support reconstruction efforts until they are certain that legal redress will be available. A functioning court system should be among the first political institutions to be reborn. A police force, a central bank, and the repair of roads and telephone networks are also essential. Together, such initiatives will reestablish a sense that a new government exists and has begun to work for, rather than against, the people.

Police personnel, judges, bureaucrats, and parliamentarians will have to be trained or retrained. Defense forces have to be reconfigured and their chiefs reoriented. Strong local leadership cannot be assumed but must be nurtured and strengthened. Once these initiatives start succeeding, it will be important to write a new constitution and constitute a government through well-supervised elections. But rushing into a national electoral contest is inadvisable before peace, law and order, and a strong administration are in place.

Afghanistan’s reconstruction will be expensive, costing as much as $15 billion over the next ten years, plus the cost of training a new army and police force. But humanitarian relief, repeated peacemaking, and the war against terror are also expensive. It will help the United States and Europe restore their battered credibility in the developing world if they supply the large sums necessary to Afghanistan and other failed states to resume functional governance. Nothing less than a new Marshall Plan is needed to mobilize people, money, and ideas for the crucial efforts in Afghanistan, the DRC, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Sudan.

When a state fails or collapses, it destroys trust and mutilates its institutions. That is why sustained state rebuilding requires time and enduring economic and technical commitments. Rich nations must
promise not to abandon state rebuilding before the tough work is finished—before a failed state has functioned well for several years and has had its political, economic, and social health restored. The worst enemy of reconstruction is a premature exit by donors, international agencies, and countries backing reconstruction initiatives. Today's Haiti and Somalia reflect such untimely exit strategies.

The new imperative of state building should supersede any lingering unilateralism. State building trumps terror. If state building is done on the cheap, or if the big powers walk away from the failed states too soon and decide that the long slog of reconstruction is for others, then the real war against terror will not have been won.
American officials face stronger incentives to ignore genocide than to stop it.

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