
Mounting Stresses, Failing States

In late November 2009, Somali pirates captured a Greek-owned supertanker, the *Maran Centaurus*, in the Indian Ocean. Carrying 2 million barrels of oil, the ship's cargo was valued at more than \$150 million. After nearly two months of negotiations, a \$7 million ransom was paid—\$5.5 million in cash was dropped from a helicopter on to the deck of the *Centaurus*, and \$1.5 million was deposited in a private bank account.¹

This modern version of piracy in the high seas is dangerous, disruptive, costly, and amazingly successful. In an effort to stamp it out, some 17 countries—including the United States, France, Russia, and China—have deployed naval units in the region, but with limited success. In 2009, Somali pirates attacked 217 vessels at sea and succeeded in hijacking 47 of them, holding them for ransom. This was up from 111 ships attacked in 2008, 42 of which were captured. And because ransoms were larger in 2009, pirate “earnings” were roughly double those in 2008.²

Somalia, a failed state, is now ruled by tribal leaders and jihadist groups, each claiming a piece of what was once a country. There is no functional national government. Part of the south is controlled by Al Shabab, a radical group affiliated with Al Qaeda. Now training terrorists, Al Shabab claimed credit in July 2010 for deto-

nating bombs in two crowds that had gathered in Kampala, Uganda, to watch the World Cup soccer championship match on television. At least 70 people were killed and many more injured.³

Uganda was a target because it supplied troops for an African peacekeeping force in Somalia. Al Shabab is also anti-soccer, banning both the playing and watching of this “infidel” sport in the territory it controls. Somalia is thus now both a base for pirates and a training ground for terrorists. As *The Economist* has observed, “like a severely disturbed individual, a failed state is a danger not just to itself but to those around it and beyond.”⁴

After a half-century of forming new states from former colonies and from the breakup of the Soviet Union, the international community is today faced with the opposite situation: the disintegration of states. The term “failing state” has been in use only a decade or so, but these countries are now a prominent feature of the international political landscape. As an article in *Foreign Policy* observes, “Failed states have made a remarkable odyssey from the periphery to the very center of global politics.”⁵

In the past, governments worried about the concentration of too much power in one state, as in Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union. But today it is failing states that provide the greatest threat to global order and stability. As *Foreign Policy* notes, “World leaders once worried about who was amassing power; now they worry about the absence of it.”⁶

Some national and international organizations maintain their own lists of failing, weak, or fragile states, as they are variously called. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency funds the Political Instability Task Force to track political risk factors. The British government's international development arm has identified 46 “fragile states.” The World Bank focuses its attention on some 30 low-income “fragile and conflict-affected countries.”⁷

But the most systematic ongoing effort to analyze countries according to their vulnerability to failure is one undertaken by the Fund for Peace and published in each July/August issue of *Foreign Policy*. This invaluable annual assessment, which draws on thousands of information sources worldwide, is rich with insights into the changes that are under way in the world and, in a broad sense, where the world is heading.⁸

The research team analyzes data for 177 countries and ranks them according to “their vulnerability to violent internal conflict and societal deterioration.” It puts Somalia at the top of the 2010 Failed States Index, followed by Chad, Sudan, Zimbabwe, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). (See Table 7–1.) Three oil-exporting countries are among the top 20: Sudan, Iraq, and Nigeria. Pakistan, now ranked at number 10, is the only failing state with a nuclear arsenal, but North Korea—nineteenth on the list—is developing a nuclear capability.⁹

The index is based on 12 social, economic, and political indicators, including population growth, economic inequality, and legitimacy of government. Scores for each indicator, ranging from 1 to 10, are aggregated into a single country indicator. A score of 120 would mean that a society is failing totally by every measure. In the first *Foreign Policy* listing in 2005, based on data from 2004, just 7 countries had scores of 100 or more. In 2006 this increased to 9. By 2009 it was 14—doubling in four years. In 2010, it was 15. This short trend is far from definitive, but higher scores for countries at the top and the doubling of countries with scores of 100 or higher suggest that state failure is both spreading and deepening.¹⁰

The most conspicuous indication of state failure is a breakdown in law and order and the related loss of personal security. States fail when national governments lose control of part or all of their territory and can no longer

Table 7–1. *Top 20 Failing States, 2010*

Rank	Country	Score
1	Somalia	114.3
2	Chad	113.3
3	Sudan	111.8
4	Zimbabwe	110.2
5	Dem. Republic of the Congo	109.9
6	Afghanistan	109.3
7	Iraq	107.3
8	Central African Republic	106.4
9	Guinea	105.0
10	Pakistan	102.5
11	Haiti	101.6
12	Côte d’Ivoire	101.2
13	Kenya	100.7
14	Nigeria	100.2
15	Yemen	100.0
16	Burma	99.4
17	Ethiopia	98.8
18	East Timor	98.2
19	North Korea	97.8
20	Niger	97.8

Source: “The Failed States Index,” *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2010.

ensure people’s security. When governments lose their monopoly on power, the rule of law begins to disintegrate. At this point, they often turn to the United Nations for help. In fact, 8 of the top 20 countries are being assisted by U.N. peacekeeping forces, including Haiti, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The number of peacekeeping missions doubled between 2002 and 2008.¹¹

Failing states often degenerate into civil war as opposing groups vie for power. In Haiti, armed gangs ruled the streets until a U.N. peacekeeping force arrived in 2004. In Afghanistan, the local warlords or the Taliban, not the central government, control the country outside of Kabul.¹²

One more recent reason for government breakdowns is the inability to provide food security, not necessarily because the government is less competent but because obtaining enough food is becoming more difficult. Providing sufficient food has proved to be particularly challenging since the rise in food prices that began in early 2007. Although grain prices have subsided somewhat from the peak in the spring of 2008, they are still well above historical levels. For low-income, food-deficit countries, finding enough food is becoming ever more challenging.¹³

With food security, as with personal security, there is a U.N. fallback. The food equivalent of the peacekeeping forces is the World Food Programme (WFP), a U.N. agency providing emergency food aid in more than 60 countries, including 19 of the top 20 countries on *Foreign Policy's* list of failing states. Some countries, such as Haiti, depend on a U.N. peacekeeping force to maintain law and order and on the WFP for part of its food. Haiti is, in effect, a ward of the United Nations.¹⁴

Failing states are rarely isolated phenomena. Conflicts can easily spread to neighboring countries, as when the genocide in Rwanda spilled over into the DRC, where an ongoing civil conflict claimed more than 5 million lives between 1998 and 2007. The vast majority of these deaths in the DRC were due to war's indirect effects, including hunger, respiratory illnesses, diarrhea, and other diseases as millions of people have been driven from their homes. Similarly, the killings in Sudan's Darfur region quickly spread into Chad as victims fled across the border.¹⁵

Failing states such as Afghanistan and Myanmar (Burma) have become sources of drugs. In 2009, Afghanistan supplied 89 percent of the world's opium, much of it made into heroin. Myanmar, though a distant second, is a major heroin supplier for China.¹⁶

The conditions of state failure may be a long time in the making, but the collapse itself can come quickly. Yemen, for example, is facing several threatening trends. It is running out of both oil and water. The underground basin that supplies Sana'a, the capital, with water may be fully depleted by 2015. The production of oil, which accounts for 75 percent of government revenue and an even larger share of export earnings, fell by nearly 40 percent from 2003 to 2009. And with its two main oil fields seriously depleted, there is nothing in sight to reverse the decline.¹⁷

Underlying these stresses is a fast-growing, poverty-stricken population, the poorest among the Arab countries, and an unemployment rate estimated at 35 percent. On the political front, the shaky Yemeni government faces a Shiite insurgency in the north, a deepening of the traditional conflict between the north and the south, and an estimated 300 Al Qaeda operatives within its borders. With its long, porous border with Saudi Arabia, Yemen could become a staging ground and a gateway for Al Qaeda to move into Saudi Arabia. Could the ultimate Al Qaeda goal of controlling Saudi Arabia, both a center of Islam and the world's leading exporter of oil, finally be within reach?¹⁸

Ranking on the Failed States Index is closely linked with demographic indicators. The populations in 15 of the top 20 failing states are growing between 2 and 4 percent a year. Niger tops this list at 3.9 percent, and Afghanistan's population is growing by 3.4 percent. A population growing at 3 percent a year may not sound overwhelming, but it will expand twentyfold in a century.

In failing states, big families are the norm, not the exception, with women in a number of countries bearing an average of six or more children each.¹⁹

In 14 of the top 20 failing states, at least 40 percent of the population is under 15, a demographic indicator that raises the likelihood of future political instability. Young men, lacking employment opportunities, often become disaffected and ready recruits for insurgencies.²⁰

In many of the countries with several decades of rapid population growth, governments are suffering from demographic fatigue, unable to cope with the steady shrinkage in cropland and freshwater supply per person or to build schools fast enough for the swelling ranks of children. Sudan is a classic case of a country caught in the demographic trap. Like many failing states, it has developed far enough economically and socially to reduce mortality but not far enough to lower fertility.

As a result, large families beget poverty and poverty begets large families. This is the trap. Women in Sudan have on average four children, double the number needed for replacement, expanding the population of 42 million by 2,000 per day. Under this pressure, Sudan—like scores of other countries—is breaking down.²¹

All but 4 of the 20 countries that lead the list of failing states are caught in this demographic trap. Realistically, they probably cannot break out of it on their own. They will need outside help in raising educational levels, especially of girls. In every society for which we have data, the more education women have, the smaller their families. And the smaller families are, the easier it is to break out of poverty.²²

Among the top 20 countries on the 2010 Failed States list, all but a few are losing the race between food production and population growth. Even getting food relief to failing states can be a challenge. In Somalia, threats from Al Shabab and the killing of food relief workers

effectively ended efforts to provide food assistance in the southern part of the hunger-stricken country.²³

Another characteristic of failing states is the deterioration of the economic infrastructure—roads, power, water, and sewage systems. For example, a lack of maintenance has left many irrigation canal networks built in an earlier era in an advanced state of disrepair, often no longer able to deliver water to farmers.

Virtually all of the top 20 countries are depleting their natural assets—forests, grasslands, soils, and aquifers—to sustain their rapidly growing populations. The 3 countries at the top of the list—Somalia, Chad, and Sudan—are losing their topsoil to wind erosion. The ongoing loss of topsoil is slowly undermining the land's productivity. Several countries in the top 20 are water-stressed and are overpumping their aquifers, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Yemen.²⁴

After a point, as rapid population growth, deteriorating environmental support systems, and poverty reinforce each other, the resulting instability makes it difficult to attract investment from abroad. Even public assistance programs from donor countries are sometimes phased out as the security breakdown threatens the lives of aid workers. A drying up of foreign investment and an associated rise in unemployment are also part of the decline syndrome.

In an age of increasing globalization, a functioning global society depends on a cooperative network of stable nation states. When governments lose their capacity to govern, they can no longer collect taxes, much less be responsible for their international debts. More failing states mean more bad debt. Efforts to control international terrorism also depend on cooperation among functioning nation states. As more and more states fail, this cooperation becomes less and less effective.

Failing states may lack a health care system that is

sophisticated enough to participate in the international network that controls the spread of infectious diseases, such as polio, or of diseases that affect both animals and people, such as avian flu, swine flu, and mad cow disease. In 1988 the international community launched an effort to eradicate polio, a campaign patterned on the highly successful one that eliminated smallpox. The goal was to get rid of the dreaded disease that used to paralyze an average of 1,000 children each day. By 2003 polio had been eradicated in all but a few countries, among them Afghanistan, India, Nigeria, and Pakistan.²⁵

But that year mullahs in northern Nigeria began to oppose the vaccination program, claiming that it was a plot to spread AIDS and sterility. As a result, the local vaccination effort broke down, and polio cases in Nigeria tripled over the next three years. Meanwhile, Nigerian Muslims making their annual pilgrimage to Mecca may have spread the disease, reintroducing the virus in some Muslim countries, such as Indonesia, Chad, and Somalia, that were already polio-free. In response, Saudi officials imposed a polio vaccination requirement on all younger visitors from countries with reported cases of polio.²⁶

In early 2007, when eradication again appeared to be in sight, violent opposition to vaccinations arose in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, where a doctor and a health worker in the Polio Eradication Program were killed. More recently, the Taliban has refused to let health officials administer polio vaccinations in the Swat Valley of Pakistan, further delaying the campaign. This raises a troubling question: In a world of failing states, is the goal of eradicating polio, once so close at hand, now beyond our reach?²⁷

Thus far, failing states have been mostly smaller ones. But some countries with over 100 million people, such as Pakistan and Nigeria, are working their way up the list. So is Mexico, where both oil production and exports have

peaked, depriving the government of tax revenue and foreign exchange. Beyond this, a criminal organization called the Zetas taps government oil pipelines in areas it controls. In 2008 and 2009, it withdrew over \$1 billion worth of oil. The government's war with the drug cartels has claimed 16,000 lives since 2006, a number far beyond American lives lost in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last decade. With income from oil and tourism shrinking and with foreign investors becoming nervous, the Mexican government is being seriously challenged.²⁸

For India (now number 79 on *Foreign Policy's* list), where 15 percent of the people are being fed with grain produced by overpumping, it could be emerging water shortages translating into food shortages that triggers its decline. As local conflicts over water multiply and intensify, tension between Hindus and Muslims could ignite, leading to instability.²⁹

Fortunately, state failure is not always a one-way street. South Africa, which could have erupted into a race war a generation ago, is now a functioning democracy. Liberia and Colombia, both of which once had high Failed State Index scores, have each made a remarkable turnaround.³⁰

Nevertheless, as the number of failing states grows, dealing with various international crises becomes more difficult. Situations that may be manageable in a healthy world order, such as maintaining monetary stability or controlling an infectious disease outbreak, become difficult and sometimes impossible in a world with many disintegrating states. Even maintaining international flows of raw materials could become a challenge. At some point, spreading political instability could disrupt global economic progress, underscoring the need to address the causes of state failure with a heightened sense of urgency.