

# Is Afghanistan a Failed State?

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## **Abstract**

The term failed state is a “currently fashionable notion” (Chomsky 2006) in International Relations, even though it is widely contested. There are two arguments to be made for its current importance. First of all, Daniel Thürer (1999) argues that the responsibility for the failing of a state is not just within that state but originates for many states primarily in the Cold War era, which thus makes the international community co-responsible. Secondly, failed states have severely negative impacts on the international community, on their region and foremost on their citizens, making its analysis so important for policy-makers. On the international level, failed states can facilitate the proliferation of illicit drugs and arms, they can exacerbate the spread of diseases by not being able to contain the spread within their own borders and they can be a breeding-ground for terrorism, to which I will come back in the next section; on the regional level they erode stability and lead to conflict and on the domestic level they can lead to the insecurity of each citizen (Ottaway, 2004, p. 1).

This essay will thus try to elucidate some of the most important arguments made by the pro-failed state advocates and by the anti-failed state advocates. The former see in the notion a possible way to operationalise state’s capabilities into a form which allows predictions for future political disasters, while the latter attack already at the level of conceptualisation, as they believe the notion ‘failed state’ to be indiscriminate of state particularities and a potential slippery slope for interventionism. I will conclude the first section by arguing that a compromise could be to substitute the notion failed state

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by the notion weak state. In my second section, I will then apply this terminology to Afghanistan.

**Keywords:** Failed State, Afghanistan

### What is a *failed* state?

The debate of state capabilities centres on two different approaches: i) scholars who want to operationalise the notion and ii) scholars who avoid the notion altogether because of conceptual flaws. The former approach attempts to predict breeding grounds of future crises, while the latter approach is afraid that the indiscriminate pooling together of states undermines this very attempt. This is a problem because unique differences, holding crucial information for decision-makers in the international community, will be obscured by a quasi-scientific approach.

The *Foreign Policy* journal (FP) creates an annually published *Failed State Index* (FSI) based on twelve equally weighted criteria (Beehner, 2012) – including variables such as demographic pressures, economic decline, security apparatus and external factionalized elites, to name but a few –. The FSI appears scientific to the layman with its continuous listing of countries and its weighted matrix but it fails to ensure validity because of its lack to provide predictability, an intrinsic problem in the research of failed states. Beehner shows, for example, that Libya, being a borderline country ranking 111<sup>th</sup> out of 177 in 2011 (FP, 2011), was a critical country, ranking 50<sup>th</sup> just a year later (FP, 2012). Even if states are continuously ranked against each other, the FSI fails to account for their differences because it focuses on the dichotomy between failed and non-failed states rather than intrinsic problems within each country. As such, it fails to predict changes throughout time and only serves as a snapshot of a given year. Another danger of the concept of “failed states” is that it could become a Trojan horse for international interventionists. Given the dichotomy between failed and non-failed states, the international community, if it so wishes, can find support for it in the United Nations Security Council, could declare a “failed” state incapable of its responsibility to protect its citizens, which can ultimately lead to an intervention to restore these capacities (Call, 2011, p. 304). This is not just a theoretical fear but can be seen for example with Resolution 1970 and 1973 in Libya.

The second approach discards the notion of failed state, not only at the level of operationalization but also at the level of conceptualisation. It attempts to replace the notion of ‘failed state’ with more vague terms such as *disintegration* or *collapse* (Thürer, 1999). The problem with the terminology of failed states, for them, is that the word ‘failed’ describes an outcome rather than a process. At the point of having failed, the problem is that there is little to nothing the international community is able to do to avert severe problems. The merit of the second approach is that they allow for a broader assessment of the actual ailments of a specific country. Thürer (1999) emphasises endogenous factors, claiming that societies in such countries are more likely to turn against themselves rather than against neighbouring countries. Ultimately, the terminology of the second approach implies at least some minor form of capabilities remaining and as such, warrants more respect towards the ailing state than the first approach would do.

Given the lack of validity, the fact that the FSI is but a snapshot in time and the potential interventionist nature of the notion failed state, it is sound to rethink the notion of failed state. Charles T. Call has done so and conceptualised states as ‘weak’ states – note the resemblance to the attempt of the second approach to avoid categorical terminology – if they emulate any or all of the following three gaps:

1. *The capacity gap* (2011, p. 306): The state is unable to provide minimal public goods and services. Call concedes however that this gap is very difficult to measure because the concept depends on several subjective definitions.
2. *The security gap* (2011, p. 307): The state is unable to provide sufficient security for its citizens, both internally and externally.
3. *The legitimacy gap* (2011, p. 308): Call refers here to the internal lack of legitimacy rather than to the external legitimacy, which is given to some autocratic ruling elites due to the upkeep of negative liberty. Georg Sørensen (2007, p. 364) calls the latter a “certified life insurance” by the UN Convention.

Having examined the conceptual flaws of the notion failed state, this notion of weak state seems to be a compromise between the first and second approach in the debate. It incorporates an analysis of state failure but this analysis is more continuous and thus allows a more nuanced examination of the underlying problems of a country. The next section will use Call's approach to assess the situation in Afghanistan now and over time.

### **Is Afghanistan a *weak* state?**

Having laid out the analytical framework in order to assess whether a state has failed or not and having substituted this terminology by Call's notion of weak state, we can now assess how this applies in practice. Call (2011, p. 310) believes Afghanistan to emulate all of these three gaps but he lacks a thorough analysis to show how much this is the case. To fill the void, I will use Ahmed Rashid's historical account of Afghanistan in order to give us a better understanding of the broader picture, which will help us later to distinguish between short-term and long-term deficiencies within each of the gaps.

Based on Rashid (2008, pp. 8-12), we can divide Afghanistan's history into three parts: i) a communist coup in 1973 removing the 200-year old Durrani dynasty; ii) the Soviet Union (SU) overthrowing the Afghani communist party in 1979, triggering the funding of counter-insurgency forces by Western states – in particular by the United States of America (USA) – via their regional ally in Pakistan; iii) the SU's withdrawal in 1989, triggering the Western states to stop their support, leading to a power vacuum and paving the way to civil war in January 1993.

According to both Carlo Ungaro (2012) and Rashid (2008, p. 12), the Cold War has been the crucial period of time in the erosion and destruction of Afghanistan, both economically and societally. For Rashid (2008, p. 8), the dependency of Afghanistan on the two big blocs during the Cold War is the reason as to why “even today [Afghanistan] cannot raise sufficient revenue to pay for the necessary elements of a modern state”. Coups, invasions, counter-coups and civil war did not just open a security gap but also primed the Afghani economy towards the perpetuation of violence over time.

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Thürer (1999) rightly blames this time and the international community to be co-responsible for the state's collapse; in Afghanistan's case the funds by either the SU or the USA helped to prolong fighting and exacerbated the fractionalization of the society.

Following the Cold War, Afghanistan plunged into a civil war, which could be a sign of the legitimacy gap because there were different factions fighting against each other. Only the emergence of the Taliban closed this gap, with high hopes that stability and prosperity would be restored (Rashid, 2008, p. 13). Indeed, the power vacuum and thus the security gap were closed by the accession of the Taliban. Yet, the Afghani people were soon disillusioned by the closeness of their once praised Taliban with Pakistan and Osama bin Laden (Rashid, 2008, p. 13). The Taliban no longer responded to the needs of the people but to Islamic principles and their supporting allies abroad. This shows that already under the Taliban rule of Afghanistan, there has been a widening legitimacy gap again because institutions were designed according to the Taliban and not according to the people's will. Additionally, the then leader Mullah Omar saw one of the most severe period of droughts and starvation, an increase in the number of refugees and internally displaced people and an economic and societal backlash to the ban on opium (Rashid, 2008, p. 19). The droughts alone, for example, have forced "more than 1 million Afghani [to flee] to neighbouring Pakistan" (PBS, 2011). A clear sign of the capacity gap because he was not able to provide for the Afghani people or even worse did not care to care for them.

Externally, the establishment of al Qaeda and the global jihad ideology – all inspired by Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan – spawned a new interest of the West towards Afghanistan. Their pressure on the Taliban culminated in resolution 1267 in 1999 – which demanded the handing over of bin Laden – and in resolution 1333 in 2000 of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) – which led to an arms embargo and the freezing of certain assets abroad – both being defied by the Taliban (Rashid, 2008, pp. 15-18).

Having finished my historical account, let us now turn to each of the gaps in turn in order to see how Afghani institutions fail to fill them. The *capacity gap's* origin might be situated in the time of the civil war, during which the provision of public goods and services came to a halt. It seems

however, that the Taliban was able to provide these services but willingly cut their provision, while aggrandising their power and grip over Afghanistan (Hehir, 2007, p. 319). This is a qualification to Call's definition in the sense that state weakness might not only be a consequence of incompetent governments but also a consequence of deliberate withholding of services and support. The gap's current acuteness is manifested by the annual *Human Development Report* (HDR), which attempts to measure the gap by evaluating a countries data about health, education and living standards (2013a), which puts Afghanistan 172<sup>nd</sup> out of 187 in their report for 2012 (2013b). In particular the current incompetence to provide adequate health care is a striking example of the capacity gap (Rashid, 2008, pp. 330-1). Afghanistan has no adequate health care and is dependent on ambulances provided by national armies or non-governmental organisations. The threat is that the increasing spread of diseases such as HIV/AIDS (Rashid, 2008) could also further increase the capacity gap because they are diseases which bear a double-cost: i) the cost for the sick and the health care system and ii) the cost for the economy of losing the productivity of a healthy man. Additionally, the HDR shows that the educational sector is still failing to provide the most basic education to the Afghani people. This means that most of the citizens continue to be ill-skilled for the jobs needed to close the capacity gap.

The *security gap* seems to be the only one which had been permanently filled during the Taliban reign. Yet, it is questionable as to whether the aggrandisement of power and the arbitrary use thereof can be seen as the kind of security Call has in mind. It has rather become a relative good for those submissive enough to the sharia law and reign of the Taliban, while defiant citizens had to fear that their security would be revoked. Instead of attenuating the historical division of the Afghani people, the USA exacerbated the security problem after having invaded Afghanistan in 2001 by funding different regional warlords to help them in their fight against the Taliban (Rashid, 2008, p. 131). Another mistake seems to be the ban of opium, which has led to a further empowerment of warlords who were able to exploit the vulnerability of farmers (Rashid, 2008, p. 323). Eventually, it also offered the Taliban an opportunity to regain power and re-establish them after the American-led invasion, as there was no coherent security strategy (Brown, 2012, p. 139). The security gap still exists because Afghanistan cannot levy sufficient funds to finance a sufficient security force. The issue is though that the situation has deteriorated in recent years with more

people feeling unsafe in their communities (Bajoria, 2011, p. 2) and with “2013 [probably being] the most violent year since 2001”, with almost all indexes of violence increasing in relation to 2012 (ECOI 2014).

Let us lastly examine the *legitimacy gap*. I mentioned before the Afghani dissatisfaction with the Taliban over their closeness to Pakistan and Bin Laden. Yet, there are more recent signs of a worrying legitimacy gap for the current democratically elected government. One of these signs is the Constitutional Loyal Jirga (CLJ), which was heralded as a new beginning after the International Security Assistance Force’s intervention against Taliban rule in 2001 but soon resulted in the opposite (Rashid, 2008, p. 217). It added to the disillusionment of the people towards the government but also towards their respective tribe leaders who could not overcome fractionalization and rather followed tribal and personal incentives over national ones. The funding of warlords by the USA is another sign of a legitimacy gap, as conflicting signals are sent. On the one hand the USA seems to support the government but on the other hand it does not deem the government fit enough to address the security gap and thus funds regional warlords. This erodes the support for both the government which is seen as weak, as well as for the USA. In particular the US intervention with the CLJ (Rashid, 2008, p. 140) and the dependence of Afghani re-building on the USA (Rashid, 2008, pp. 136-7) makes the government look weak and dependent, eroding its legitimacy. We can see that there is a historical dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the government – in particular because the people were not able to choose their own destiny for so long – but the recent trend is not helping but rather exacerbating these feelings. It remains to be seen as to whether the elections scheduled for 2014 will be able to start filling the gap again or whether potential irregularities deteriorate the situation even further.

From the above analysis, it seems that the fact that Afghanistan cannot raise sufficient revenues is cynically the underlying problem for all of the three gaps. It makes Afghanistan dependent on international donors, which makes it look weak, which makes international donors look for military support in regional warlords, which erodes the Afghani legitimacy, which might have a negative impact on the effectiveness of infrastructural projects to close the capacity gap, which

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means that Afghanistan continues to need money from international donors. It is a vicious circle, which is hard to break through for Afghanistan.

*Table 1 Summary of the deficiencies of Afghanistan in respect to Call's three gaps of weak states*

***Call's three gaps of weak states*** Deficiencies

<i>Capacity Gap</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Civil war brought supply of minimal services to a halt</li> <li>• Strong Taliban unwilling to provide them once in power</li> </ul>
<i>Security Gap</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentality of distinction following fragmentation of society</li> <li>• Taliban exploited post-invasion negligence of NATO and reconquered parts of Afghanistan, threatening the new order</li> <li>• Militarisation of society; funding of competing militia and warlords</li> </ul>
<i>Legitimacy Gap</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disillusionment with proxy-status of Taliban to Pakistan</li> <li>• Disillusionment with influence of Bin Laden and al Qaeda</li> <li>• Disillusionment with leaders of tribes and government regarding CLJ</li> <li>• Economic situation seems inevitably bad</li> </ul>

Table 1 summarises the deficiencies of Afghanistan in respect to the gap they belong to. Afghanistan is a weak state because it shows strong signs of all three gaps. Nevertheless, there are also some successes achieved by the Afghani people, their government and the international community such as higher school enrolment, the return of refugees or the spread of media (Rashid, 2008, pp. 183-4), which gives hope about Afghanistan's future potential.



## Conclusion

Afghanistan has not failed but it has severe problems. It emulates all three of Call's gaps and thus can be called a weak state. The underlying problem seems to be the fragmented security and the lack of funds to close any of the gaps. Afghanistan is dependent on the international community but there is also enough evidence to claim that it is the international community which is responsible for the current situation – at least historically –. The problem about the discussion of whether a state has failed, collapsed, disintegrated or as to whether it is weak, is that it does not give us enough answers of what to do next. While we could say that decision-makers just need to focus on closing the gaps, we do not know which comes first, second and last. What is more important for the Afghani at the moment? Is it a well-functioning security apparatus and thus the end of fear of constant attacks? Or is it maybe a revival of the economy, which would allow the unemployment rate to drop? Having analysed Afghanistan to be weak, these questions need to be answered in a future paper in order to not just give an account of the present but to also give a strategy about the future.

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