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August Roundtable: Re-Thinking State Failure and Human Rights, Introduction

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Abstract
An annotation of:

"Think Again, Failed States ". By James Traub. Foreign Policy. July/August 2011.

Keywords

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Re-thinking State Failure and Human Rights

Article under review: "[Think Again, Failed States](#)". By James Traub. *Foreign Policy*.
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The former Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), Juan Gabriel Valdes, once told me: "Failed states is one of those ideas leading to confused policy making that could result in gross misinterpretations, and one that it is sometimes understood by locals as a pejorative term. I decided to prohibit the use of 'failed state' in the UN mission in Haiti because there was no gain in using the term." This statement is at the heart of the discussion of this month's Roundtable article, "Think Again: State failure." It illustrates the theoretical and practical usefulness of an analytical framework of that was introduced in the mid 1990s, and that remains widely contested today.

The author of the Foreign Policy article, James Traub, analyzes a number of "myths" related to "failed states" with the objective of disentangling some of the current debates on this subject. One myth in his analysis stands out. It refers to the notion that failed states are not necessarily "ungoverned spaces," and highlights the importance of distinguishing between "hapless" and "intentional" states in order to avoid this common misunderstanding. In his words: "A categorical divide, albeit a sometimes blurry one, separates two classes of failed states. A country like Somalia is incapable of forming and executing state policy; it is a hapless state. States like Sudan, by contrast, are precarious by design. Or take Pakistan, which has followed clear and consistent policies, laid down by the military, since its inception in 1947. Unlike Somalia, or, for that matter, its neighbor Afghanistan, Pakistan is an *intentional* state."

This idea led Traub to the notion that the international community can respond to some cases of state failure, yet its effectiveness will depend greatly on the "willingness of the state to be helped." As he illustrates, "Outsiders can do little in Zimbabwe so long as Robert Mugabe remains in power, for Mugabe is prepared to wreck his country in order to preserve his rule over it. The best thing outsiders can do is pressure or bribe him and his immediate circle into leaving. On the other hand, outsiders may be able to accomplish a great deal in Liberia, where President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has invited U.N. officials to operate from inside the country's ministries in order to provide expertise and prevent abuse. The same contrast may apply between Sudan, an autocracy afloat on oil wealth, and Southern Sudan, a new country born naked and helpless, but with a legitimate political leadership …The intentional states, like Burma or Sudan, will exploit outside help for their own purposes." James Traub ends his analysis with a concrete proposal: "Maybe we can formulate a new kind of failing-states policy, one to help the deserving states, those that can be helped, and minimize the harm from the others."

The Roundtable panelists concur with the idea that the current concept of state failure is lacking in many respects. Among the critiques they offer, they emphasize that state failure has no coherent definition due to its many variables (economic decline, wars, corruption, weak institutions, etc), and that its broadness prevents it from being measurable. Therefore, state failure becomes an unhelpful concept, and it does not focus on the human rights of people as part of the solution. As Brooke Ackerly so aptly notes, it is fundamental to "focus on the human rights of people, not the failure of states." The panelists disagree with some of the solutions and

proposals provided in the article, yet they do support the author's assertion that addressing state failure is a moral imperative for the international community today.

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Roundtable Editor