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“Failed States Are Everyone’s Problem”

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“Failed States Are Everyone’s Problem”

Abstract

This article raises interesting issues but cannot answer its own puzzles because it fails to define what constitutes a threat or danger to US national security. As an American citizen, the security of the Central African Republic is in my personal interest. The CAR is a country where it has been reported that one out of every sixteen mothers dies during childbirth. That is a serious problem! Who is to say it is not in Americans’ interest to prevent state failure there? If the US government is not interested in Central Africans’ security, obviously, there is a disconnect between the interests of the US government and the interests of its own people.

Keywords

Human rights, Failed states, Nationalism, United Nations, United States foreign policy

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"Failed States are Everyone's Problem"

by Devin Joshi

This article raises interesting issues but cannot answer its own puzzles because it fails to define what constitutes a threat or danger to US national security. As an American citizen, the security of the Central African Republic is in my personal interest. The CAR is a country where it has been reported that one out of every sixteen mothers dies during childbirth. That is a serious problem! Who is to say it is not in Americans' interest to prevent state failure there? If the US government is not interested in Central Africans' security, obviously, there is a disconnect between the interests of the US government and the interests of its own people.

Furthermore, the premise of the article is flawed, because the author approaches the issue of failed states from a nationalistic paradigm. For the nationalist, it is a serious issue if people in his or her own country are harmed, but it is unimportant if people in other countries are harmed. According to this paradigm, there was no need for the US to enter the European theater in World War II. This logic invokes a notion of tribalism, that my tribe/nation deserves basic rights that other tribes/nations do not. While there may be many people in this world who subscribe to such tribal notions, including those living in wealthy Western nations like the US, the principle of human rights is a complete repudiation of tribalism and nationalism. The principle of human rights enshrined in international law and multiple international conventions and agreements under the auspices of the United Nations guarantees all humans basic rights regardless of what country they happen to be born into or reside. All humans are entitled to these rights regardless of their nationality, race, gender, age, wealth, or income, because they are humans and not because they were lucky enough to be born in this state or that.

An equally disturbing element of this article are several sweeping, unsubstantiated claims. The reason Haiti could not develop in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is that the French government forced massive indebtedness upon the island, and the US participated in a long trade blockade of the nation. These racist policies were the punishment that Haitians received for achieving freedom from slavery and colonialism. The notion that Somalia poses no threat to other societies also has no basis. Somali pirates' frequent hijacking of ships presents serious threats to international trade and the foreign citizens aboard those ships. One also has to acknowledge that terrorism is not the only threat to people's security. Failed states threaten their own people, neighboring states, and US allies, and are often bastions of crime, human rights violations, and at times destabilization of the global trading system upon which the food, economic, and energy security of most nations depend.

The article raises the possibility that "intentional states" present more of a threat than failed ones; but how do we identify an "intentional state?" Which specific intentions do we need to worry about? One could, for example, flip this argument. From the Iraqi perspective, the US was an intentional state and a threat to Iraqi national security because the US government was intent on invading Iraq in 2003, even though Iraq did not pose a threat to the US. Perhaps the question should be asked: "Do US 'national security' policies increase the threat that states will fail?" Asking this question is key to taking the preventative approach recommended in this article. But taking prevention seriously means not only trying to do good, but also not doing bad. For example, we need to ask deeper questions about the connection between ranking on the failed

states index and the most highly indebted poor countries. Are countries failing because they are beholden to foreign financiers?

A final concern is that the article does not advocate democracy in any form as a solution to the failed states' problems. Arguably, states fail because their leaders do not care about developing the state, are not actually sovereign, or because the leaders ignore the wishes of the population. A solution might be to let the people of these countries decide for themselves rather than have their governance determined by bureaucrats or think-tank pundits in Washington DC.

Dr. Devin K. Joshi is an assistant professor at the University of Denver's Josef Korbel School of International Studies where he teaches courses on democracy and development. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Washington, an M.A. from the East-West Center, and a B.A. from Stanford University. His research focuses on the relevance and application of democratic and good governance interventions to improving human development and human security in the developing world. His recent articles have appeared in Economic and Political Weekly, International Studies Review, Socio-Legal Review, and The Human Rights Dictionary.