

Environmental and demographic forces threaten state failure

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Uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and across the Middle East at the start of 2011 have reminded the world just how politically fragile some countries are. But the focus of international politics has been shifting for some time now.

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 Failed States Index, undertaken by the Fund for Peace and published in each July/August issue of *Foreign Policy*, ranks 177 countries according to "their vulnerability to violent internal conflict and societal deterioration," based on 12 social, economic, and political indicators.

In 2005, just seven countries had scores of 100 or more out of 120. (A score of 120 would mean that a society is failing totally by every measure.) By 2010, it was 15. 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.

States fail when national govern-

ments lose control of part or all of their territory and can no longer ensure people's security. Failing states often degenerate into civil war as opposing groups vie for power. In Afghanistan, for example, the local warlords or the Taliban, not the central government, control the country outside of Kabul.

One reason for government breakdowns that has become more relevant recently 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 subsided again for a while, they have remained well above historical levels and, at the beginning of 2011, are fast approaching levels similar to the spring 2008 peak.

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. The populations in 15 of the top 20 failing states are growing between two and four percent a year.

Many 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.

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.

Many are caught in the demographic trap: They have developed enough economically and socially to reduce mortality but not enough to lower fertility. As a result, large families beget poverty and poverty begets large families.

Virtually all of the top 20 countries are depleting their natural assets — forests, grasslands, soils, and aquifers — to sustain their rapidly growing populations. The three countries at the top of the list — Somalia, Chad and Sudan — are losing their topsoil to wind erosion, undermining the land's productivity. Several countries in the top 20 are water-stressed and are over pumping their aquifers.

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.

The conditions of state failure may be a long time in the making, but the collapse itself can come

quickly.

Before revolution in Tunisia helped spark unrest in Yemen in January of 2011, the country already faced several threatening trends. It is running out of both oil and water, and has the poorest population among Arab countries.

The shaky Yemeni government faces a Shiite insurgency in the north, a deepening 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 gateway for al-Qaeda to move into Saudi Arabia.

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. Similarly, the killings in Sudan's Darfur region quickly spread into Chad as victims fled across the border.

Failing states can become training grounds for international terrorist groups, as in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Yemen; bases for pirates, as in Somalia; or sources of drugs, as in Afghanistan and Myanmar.

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.

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.

One of the leading challenges facing the international community is how to prevent that slide into chaos. Continuing with business as usual with international assistance programs is not working.

Reversing the process of state failure is an even more challenging, demanding process than the rebuilding of war-torn states after World War II, and it requires a level of interagency cooperation that no donor country has yet achieved. Since state failure is, by its nature, systemic, a systemic response is called for — one that is responsive to the many interrelated sources of failure.

Within the US government, efforts to deal with weak and failing states are fragmented. What is needed now is a new cabinet-level agency — a Department of Global Security (DGS) — that would fashion a coherent policy toward each weak state.

This recommendation, initially set forth in a report of the Commission on Weak States and US National Security, recognizes that threats to security now come less from military power and more from the social and environmental trends that undermine states.

The new agency would incorporate AID (now part of the State Department) and all the various foreign assistance programs that are currently in other government departments, thereby assuming responsibility for US development assistance across the board. It would be funded by shifting fiscal resources from the Department of Defense, in effect becoming part of a new security budget.

It would focus on the central sources of state failure by helping to stabilize population, restore environmental support systems, eradicate poverty, and strengthen the rule of law through bolstering police forces, court systems, and, where needed, the military.

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