Download date: 14. Nov. 2026

Danish Institute for International Studies

Fragile states
Analytically vacuous, politically useful

Clausen, Maria-Louise; Albrecht, Peter

Publication date:
2022

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication

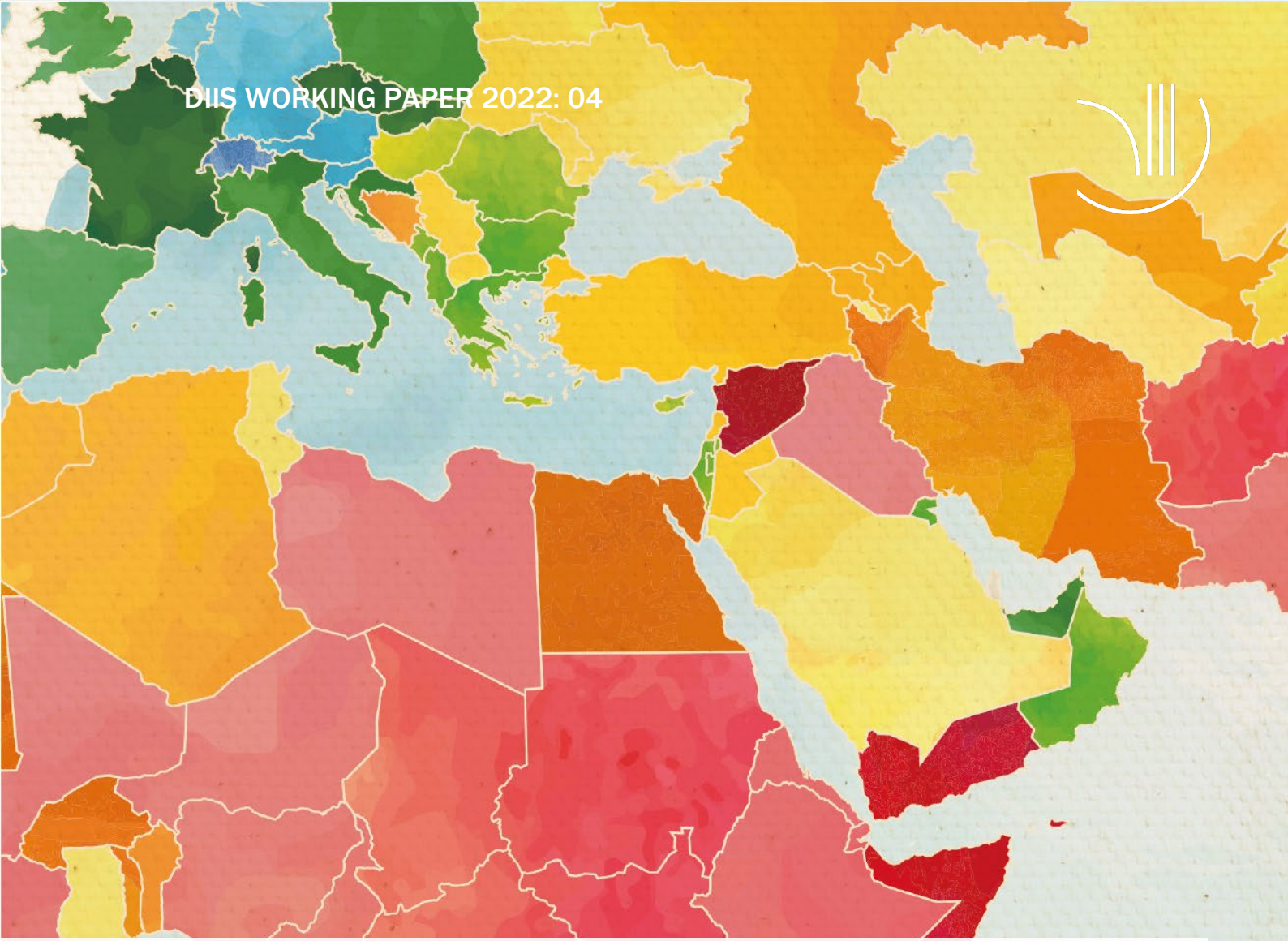
Citation for pulished version (APA):
Clausen, M.-L., & Albrecht, P. (2022). *Fragile states: Analytically vacuous, politically useful*. Danish Institute for International Studies. DIIS Working Paper Vol. 2022 No. 04

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

DIIS WORKING PAPER 2022: 04



FRAGILE STATES ANALYTICALLY VACUOUS, POLITICALLY USEFUL

Maria-Louise Clausen and Peter Albrecht

Acknowledgements
Working Papers make DIIS researchers' and partners' work in progress available to readers prior to formal publication. They may include documentation which is not necessarily published elsewhere. DIIS Working Papers are published under the responsibility of the author alone.

This Working Paper has received financial support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark. It reflects the views of the authors alone.

A huge thank you to Marius Hauge Hvithamar for his research assistance in putting together this Working Paper. An equally large thank you to Helene Maria Kyed for reading through and commenting on the Working Paper.

Maria-Louise Clausen
Senior researcher, DIIS
mlcl@diis.dk

Peter Albrecht
Senior researcher, DIIS
paa@diis.dk

DIIS WORKING PAPER 2022: 04
DIIS · Danish Institute for International Studies
Østbanegade 117, DK-2100 Copenhagen, Denmark
Tel: +45 32 69 87 87
E-mail: diis@diis.dk
www.diis.dk
ISBN 978-87-7236-078-2 (pdf)
DIIS publications can be downloaded free of charge from www.diis.dk
© Copenhagen 2022, the authors and DIIS

FRAGILE STATES ANALYTICALLY VACUOUS, POLITICALLY USEFUL

Maria-Louise Clausen and Peter Albrecht

DIIS · DANISH INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract **2**

Introduction **2**

Methodology and approach **4**

Failed and fragile states since the 1990s – the concepts and their development **5**

The academic debate on failed and fragile states 6

The concept of failed and fragile states in policy circles 6

Securitisation of the fragile state concept **11**

Only skin-deep? Politics before SSR in Somalia **12**

Iraq – failed state or failed interventions? **15**

Are there regional differences in how the fragile state concept is applied? **19**

Conclusion **20**

ABSTRACT

Why is it still relevant to probe the notion of fragility when the concept has been so heavily criticised? Because it continues to be used in policy on conflict, security and development. For example, the United Nations names fragility as a major challenge to achieving the Millennium Development Goals and a threat to global security. This working paper explores how the concept of fragility has evolved and been adapted since the inception of the failed state concept in the 1990s to the current focus on fragile situations. The paper then argues that this reflects the vacuous character of the concept, which makes it politically flexible rather than a precise diagnostic tool. It provides justifications for interventions that are often prioritised due to the impact of fragile states on 'our' (Western) security. We trace how this evolving understanding of fragility has been utilised in two cases, Somalia and Iraq, through the prism of security-related programming, often referred to as Security Sector Reform. We illustrate how the concept is applied to very diverse cases in ways that tend to prioritise the interests of the interveners over those of the people who are purportedly intervened on behalf of.

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the Cold War, conflicts were no longer considered US–Soviet proxy wars, but were increasingly seen as consequences of ethnic violence and poverty.[1] Conflicts within rather than between states emerged as the norm, occurring in contexts that were characterised by a 'new disturbing' phenomenon, the failed state, as Helman and Ratner noted in 1992, 'utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community.'[2] These were states, Robert Kaplan wrote in 1994, characterised by 'the withering away of central governments, the rise of tribal and regional domains, the unchecked spread of disease and the growing pervasiveness of war.'[3] They were even equated with 'serious mental or physical illness',[4] which opened up discussions of establishing trusteeships or guardianships as failed states were deemed unable to govern themselves. Reflections such as these were indications of what was to come: Western liberal democracies placing the destabilising effects of failed states at the centre of their development and security policies.

[1] Maria-Louise Clausen & Peter Albrecht (2021) 'Interventions since the Cold War: From statebuilding to stabilization'. *International Affairs* 97(4): 1203–1220.

[2] Gerald B. Helman & Steven R. Ratner (1992) 'Saving failed states'. *Foreign Policy* 89: 1–20, p. 3.

[3] Robert D. Kaplan (1994) 'The coming anarchy'. *Atlantic Monthly* 273(2): 44–76.

[4] Helman & Ratner, 'Saving failed states', p. 12.

When the failed state emerged as an analytical category in the 1990s, it was predominantly considered a threat to people living within it. This changed with the terrorist attacks on the US in 2001 that transformed failed states from being a development concern into being a key security threat to the US and its Western partners. The link between state failure and transnational security threats like terrorism was used to justify interventions in areas previously deemed the sovereign prerogative of states and their governments.[5] In the 2000s 'failed state' was gradually superseded by 'fragile state' as the dominant analytical category, which indicated a small but important shift in meaning. Fragile states were described as dysfunctional but not quite failed political entities. They were characterised by central governments and bureaucracies that were unable to provide basic public services to the populations living within them,[6] and portrayed as suffering from a range of state capacity deficits with internal security provision being crucial among these.[7] This made the establishment or restoration of the state's ability to provide security (and justice) at both national and local levels central to interventions in fragile states.[8] Security sector reform (SSR), which emerged during the 1990s, became one of the policy instruments and practical responses to address these challenges and was presented as a way to turn these states into 'effective' and 'legitimate' political entities.[9] As Rita Abrahamsen explains, the intervening party sought to create 'a legal-rational Weberian state' with 'democratic police, military and justice sectors' through 'training, education and resource transfers'.[10] Security was, in this regard, an incontestable precondition for development, which aligned the two – security and development – closely.[11]

This paper first traces the emergence of the failed and fragile state concepts, how they evolved as analytical categories and were translated by bilateral donors and intergovernmental organisations into intervention strategies, policy concepts, and practices such as SSR. While doing so we make two related arguments. First, that the link between fragility and conflict has meant an inherent securitisation of the fragile state concept as it emerged out of the notion of the failed state. Second, while the fragile state concept has lost academic traction because it is considered analytically vacuous, too broad, and a normative judgment on the Global South,[12]

[5] Charles T. Call (2011) 'Beyond the "failed state": toward conceptual alternatives'. *European Journal of International Relations* 17(2): 303.

[6] Francis Fukuyama (2004) *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Profile Books.

[7] Peter Albrecht (2020) *Hybridization, Intervention and Authority: Security Beyond Conflict in Sierra Leone*, Abingdon: Routledge, 23–44.

[8] Security and justice are seen as closely aligned in development-oriented intervention policy. See Peter Albrecht & Paul Jackson (2021) 'Non-linearity and transitions in Sierra Leone's security and justice programming'. *International Peacekeeping* 28(5): 813–837.

[9] Peter Albrecht & Finn Stepputat (2015) 'The rise and fall of security sector reform in development'. In Paul Jackson (ed.) *Handbook on Security and Development*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 194–207.

[10] Rita Abrahamsen (2016) 'Exporting decentered security governance: the tensions of security sector reform'. *Global Crime* 17(3-4): 281–295, p. 281.

[11] Mark Duffield (2007) Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples. Cambridge: Polity.

[12] Natasha Ezrow & Erica Frantz (2013) 'Revisiting the concept of the failed state: bringing the state back in'. *Third World Quarterly* 34(8): 1323–1338; Peter Albrecht & Louise Wiuff Moe (2015) 'The simultaneity of

it remains widely used in policy circles precisely because of this vagueness that lends itself to different actors' security priorities and geopolitical interests.[13] While it was the West that developed and instrumentalised the state fragility label to legitimise interventions in countries facing violence and profound poverty, the use of the concept is now transnational.[14] States in the Global South and non-Western great powers all appropriate and reinterpret the fragility concept; for example when the government of Uganda used the notion of fragility to persuade donors to continue support despite its domestic transgressions,[15] or when Saudi Arabia used the failed state concept to legitimise its military intervention in Yemen to Western audiences.[16] The fragility agenda supports a seemingly coherent narrative on instability and conflict in the Global South and justifies a wide range of military and non-military forms of intervention. In turn, these are presented as being in the interest of populations of the states labelled as fragile, but more often serve the interests of those who intervene.[17] The result is usually lack of popular support for humanitarian and military interventions in the targeted states. In the second part of the paper we first explore how the failed and fragile state concepts have been applied in two case studies, Iraq and Somalia, and how the application of these concepts has framed interventions, specifically focusing on SSR-related activities. The two cases are a starting point for a broader discussion of differences and similarities in how these globally applied concepts have been used in relation to the Middle East and Africa. We show how, in the case of sub-Saharan Africa, SSR has emerged from the security–development nexus, which, in short, emphasises that security is a prerequisite for development. In the Middle East, SSR has become more a question of addressing volatile state and non-state security actors. The changeable character of how the concept is used is epitomised by this ability to capture both security and development concerns of the West, separately or in combination, as the discursive basis for intervention.

METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

This paper is based on a review of the relevant academic and policy literature (cited in footnotes), as well as interviews with key stakeholders. Interviewees were probed about their understandings of fragility, and its relationship to SSR, as well as about the development and usage of these concepts in the Danish Ministry of

authority in hybrid orders'. *Peacebuilding* 3(1): 1–16. Kwesi Aning, Peter Albrecht & Anne Blaabjerg Nielsen (2021) 'West Africa Security Perspectives: Kwesi Aning Explains'. Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies.

[13] The Danish MFA use the term 'fragility' 47 times in the present strategy for development (2021–2025).

[14] Sonja Grimm, Nicholas Lemay-Hébert & Olivier Nay (2014) ' "Fragile States": introducing a political concept'. *Third World Quarterly* 35(2) 197–209.

[15] Jonathan Fisher (2014) 'When it pays to be a "fragile state": Uganda's use and abuse of a dubious concept'. *Third World Quarterly* 35(2): 316–332.

[16] Maria-Louise Clausen (2019) 'Justifying military intervention: Yemen as a failed state' *Third World Quarterly* 40(3): 488–502.

[17] Branwen G. Jones (2013) ' "Good governance" and "state failure": genealogies of imperial discourse'. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26(1): 49–70.

Foreign Affairs. The study also draws on previous fieldwork and interviews conducted by the two authors in Iraq, Yemen, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Mali. The study's premise is that concepts are neither politically nor ideologically neutral but are part of discursive practices that represent truths from particular points of view. The study shows how representations such as fragility and failure (of states) are co-productive of hierarchies of power and authority that make specific courses of action possible.[18]

Concepts are supposed to help shape our understanding of problems, and consequently also possible solutions. Because of their inherently political nature, it follows that the failed and fragile state concepts are unstable and evolve over time. The paper therefore uses a data set that shows their prevalence and usage in official UN documents between 1993 and 2020.[19] The use of 'failed state' or 'fragile state' was examined in each document. Data was then collated in Excel to provide an overview (available upon request). Each entry contains the document symbol, the date, the title of the document and the sentence/context of the use of the failed state(s)/fragile state(s) concept. By doing this, we were able to identify the ebbs and flows of how the concepts have been used and, by extension, their legitimacy in policy discourse.

FAILED AND FRAGILE STATES SINCE THE 1990S – THE CONCEPTS AND THEIR DEVELOPMENT

The failed state concept entered policy and academic debates, mainly political science, in the early 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and quickly moved into discourses on security, peace, and development in the Global North. These debates were characterised by considerable overlap and cross-fertilisation between academia and policy circles. Indeed, as Gourevitch noted in 2004, from its first iterations in the early 1990s, the notion of a failed state 'spread like wildfire among diplomats, politicians, policy wonks, academics and anyone else grasping to make sense' of what was considered a global unipolar scene, dominated by the US.[20] As we discuss below, the fragile state concept grew out of these initial debates of failure, framed as a more benign and functional political entity, perhaps less dangerous, but equally prone to intervention.

18 Roxanne L. Doty (1996) Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North–South Relations. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

19 The Official Documents of the United Nations: http://documents.un.org/ The search was conducted in the UN ODS database. It was refined by adding the relevant dates in the appropriate fields (publication date) and making a Boolean search for 'failed state' OR 'failed states' and 'fragile state' OR 'fragile states' respectively. This builds on Maria-Louise Clausen (2016) State-building in Fragile States: Strategies of Embedment, Aarhus: Politica.

20 Alex Gourevitch (2004) 'Review of "The Unfailing of the State", by Robert I. Rotberg, Jennifer Milliken, T. V. Paul, G. John Ikenberry & John A. Hall'. Journal of International Affairs 58(1): 255–60, available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/24357947; Shahar Hameiri (2007) 'Failed states or a failed paradigm? State capacity and the limits of institutionalism'. Journal of International Relations and Development 10(2): 122–149, p. 124.

The academic debate on failed and fragile states

In academia, the emergence of the failed and later the fragile state concept generated a large body of work that sought to identify the underlying causes of state failure and to refine the indicators used to measure it. However, the literature struggled to overcome the concept's inherent ambiguity and the deep-seated Eurocentrism of taking the Western/Weberian state model and assessing all other political entities against it.[21] Paradoxically, this was exacerbated rather than alleviated by the expansive body of work emerging to define and operationalise the exact characteristics of failed and fragile states and, not least, how to respond to them.[22] The basic problem that these works faced was that they sought to simplify political, social and economic processes that were inherently complex, multifaceted and deeply intertwined. While these efforts took place, an emerging line of thinking in academia questioned the analytical value of the fragile state label, rejecting the exercise of conceptual clarification altogether.[23] During the 2000s, critique of the limited analytical strength of the concept of fragile states and the inherent Western-centric notion of political order came to dominate academic debates on state fragility and as a consequence the concept lost its traction.[24] In policy discourse, however, it continues to have a central role in how the Global South is both discussed and responded to.

The concept of failed and fragile states in policy circles

The failed state was picked up in policy debates in the 1990s,[25] and initially linked to intra-state conflict embedded in a post-Cold War search for national identity. The sentiment, expressed by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in 1994,[26] that failed states were unable to govern themselves and therefore in need of international assistance to restore (internal) order, dominated debates in the UN. This created close links between the failed state concept, peacebuilding and state-building agendas as they were formulated in the 1990s. As Christopher J. Bickerton argues: 'Only after the idea that states could fail had been established

[21] Clausen (2016) *Statebuilding in Fragile States*, pp. 160–165.

[22] See Olivier Nay (2013) 'Fragile and failed states: critical perspectives on conceptual hybrids'. *International Political Science Review* 34(3):326–341 for a discussion of this. Andersen et al. referred to state fragility as a 'catch-all phrase' in 2008. L. Andersen (2008) 'Fragile states on the international agenda', in. L. Engberg-Pedersen, L. Andersen, F. Stepputat et al. (eds) 'Fragile Situations: Background Papers', *DIIS Report* 11, Copenhagen: DIIS, pp. 7–19.

[23] Isabel Rocha De Siqueira (2014) 'Measuring and managing "state fragility": the production of statistics by the World Bank, Timor-Leste and the G7'. *Third World Quarterly* 35(2): 268–283.

[24] Charles T. Call (2008) 'The fallacy of the "failed state" '. *Third World Quarterly* 29(8): 1491–1507; Charles T. Call (2008) 'Knowing peace when you see it: setting standards for peacebuilding success'. *Civil Wars* 10(2); Natasha Ezrow & Erica Frantz (2013) 'Revisiting the concept of the failed state: bringing the state back in'. *Third World Quarterly* 34(8); Markus V. Hoehne & Tobias Hagmann (2009) 'Failures of the state failure debate: Evidence from the Somali territories'. *Journal of International Development* 21(1); Daniel Lambach & Tobias Debiel (2007) 'State failure revisited I: globalization of security and neighborhood effects', INEF (University of Duisburg-Essen); Nicolas Lemay-Hébert (2009) 'Statebuilding without nation-building? Legitimacy, state failure and the limits of the institutionalist approach'. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 3(1); Derick W. Brinkerhoff (2014) 'State fragility and failure as wicked problems: beyond naming and taming'. *Third World Quarterly* 35(2): 333–344.

[25] Parts of this section builds on Clausen (2016) *Statebuilding in Fragile States.*

[26] United Nations, General Assembly (1994) 'Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization', September 1994 (A/49/1), pp. 41–42.

was it possible for internationalised state-building to be mooted as an acceptable solution'.[27] Right from its inception the failed state concept was rejected by some governments in the Global South because it was seen as a way to legitimise externally-driven – meaning Western – interventions and the establishment of neo-trusteeships.[28] Others (usually in the West) saw it as an instrument to legitimise and rationalise their own interventionist ambitions or as a lever to obtain support from donors.

In a reflection of its self-perception as a non-colonising superpower, the US was initially wary of the concept. Indeed, a US official argued in 2000 during discussions on the Democratic Republic of the Congo at the UN that, '[s]tates do not fail, leaders do'.[29] The statement came as a response to analysis that connected state failure to the boundaries that had been arbitrarily drawn up across Africa at the Berlin Conference in 1885 and still exist today. However, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 propelled the failed state concept to the forefront of security policies, especially in the West and led by the US.[30] Failed states were now seen as global security threats, a sentiment epitomised by the 2002 American National Security Strategy: 'America is now threatened less by conquering states than by failing ones'.[31] The strategy launched a period where the US administration and policy analysts utilised the failed state concept to frame and legitimise interventions, military if necessary, to rebuild states as liberal democratic entities in the name of global security. It was argued that failed states pose a pronounced challenge to global stability because they lack a domestic government that is committed to carrying out reforms,[32] making them 'extremely difficult' to piece back together.[33] The increased usage of the failed state concept from 2001 and onwards, peaking in 2004, corresponds with the American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. This peak is seen in Figure 1. that gives an overview of the total number of UN documents referring to 'fragile state(s)' and 'failed state(s)' from 1993–2020.

[27] Christopher Bickerton (2007) 'State-Building. Exporting State Failure'. In Christopher Bickerton, Philip Cunliffe & Alexander Gourevitch (eds.) *Politics without Sovereignty: A Critique of Contemporary International Relations,* London: University College London Press, p. 208.

[28] See for example A/48/PV.7 (1993) where Mr. De Moura from Angola in a plenary session of the General Assembly states that '…we [the government of Angola] are opposed to the doctrine that has been termed the états en échec – the failed States – according to which these countries are not able to resolve their problems by themselves and, therefore, need new "tutors".'

[29] The American representative, Mr. Holbrook, states that 'Let us stand together to reject the notion that has gained some prominence among commentators that some states have become "failed states". States do not fail, leaders do'. UNSC, 4156 meeting, 15 June 2000, The Situation concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo, S/PV.4156, p. 9.

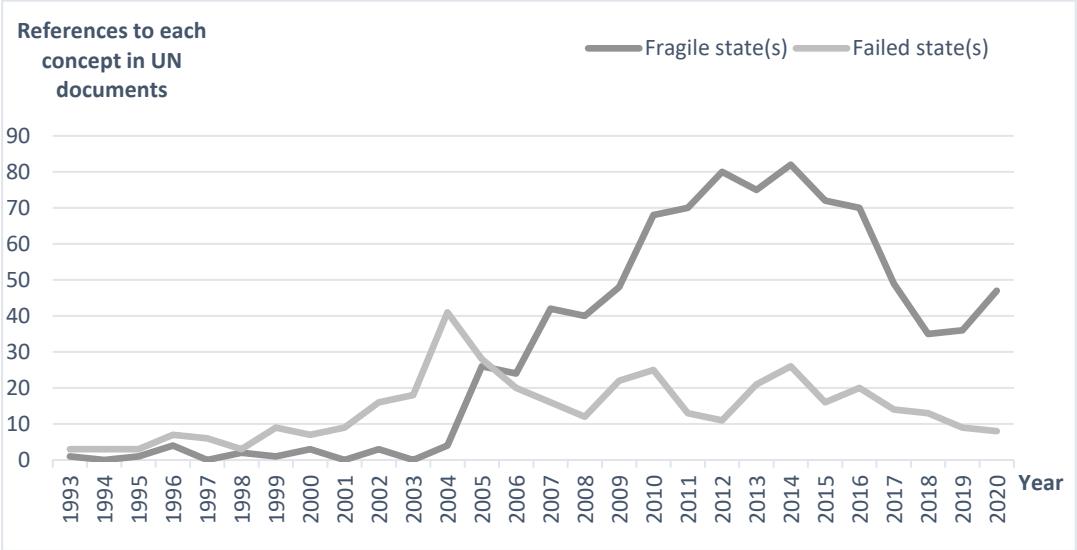
[30] Charles T. Call (2011) 'Beyond the "failed state": toward conceptual alternatives', *European Journal of International Relations* 17(2): 1–21.

[31] US National Security Strategy 2002

[32] ACC/1996/16; ACC/1997/7

[33] A/50/PV.15 (1995).

Figure 1. Overview of use of fragile/failed state(s), 1993–2020[34]



The usage of the failed state concept drops after 2004 as it quickly faced widespread resistance for being overly condescending and dismissive of forms of governance that did not measure up to the liberal-democratic (Western-Weberian) model.[35] Its usage was reserved for states that were definitively collapsed, such as Somalia, which has been in the top three of failed/fragile states since the concepts' inception (in 2010 it was presented by the UN Secretary-General as having 'improved', with the help of the international community, to become a fragile state).[36] The fragile state concept gradually came to dominate policy discussions from the mid-2000s onwards as it was normalised by policymakers through, for example, the 'New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States'. It has spread among bilateral and multilateral donors, especially within development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding.[37] The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has played a key role in this regard, formulating one of the most influential definitions of the fragile state.[38]

[34] This is an updated version of figure 5.1. in Clausen (2016) *Statebuilding in Fragile States*.

[35] Interview, Danish MFA.

[36] A765/328/Add.3 (2010).

[37] Nay (2013) 'Fragile and failed states'.

[38] See Olivier Nay (2014) 'International organisations and the production of hegemonic knowledge: how the World Bank and the OECD helped invent the fragile state concept'. *Third World Quarterly* 35(2): 210–231. For more on the role of OECD and the World Bank in developing and spreading the fragile state concept. See https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/brief/harmonized-list-of-fragile-situations for an overview of the World Bank's classification of fragile states.

OECD definition of a fragile state:

'When state structures lack political will and/or capacity to provide the basic functions needed for poverty reduction, development and to safeguard the security and human rights of their populations.'

OECD (2007) *Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations.*

As the fragile state concept was adopted by a growing number of Western governments and international organisations to explain the challenges facing societies and governments across the Global South, it became a catch-all category for numerous concepts with similar connotations, including state weakness, state collapse, and challenged performers.[39] Its formalisation in policy documents and foreign policy programmes despite – or perhaps, as we indicate, because of – its ambiguity secured the concept's continued usage in policy. But designating a state as fragile is not a neutral description. Most strikingly, conflict became an integral part of the concept,[40] and fragile states were increasingly discussed as either particularly vulnerable to transnational causes of instability or as exacerbating already existing insecurity and war. This sentiment was formulated by the American representative to the UN in 2010:

> *In our interconnected age, conflicts that start in fragile States can drag entire regions into violence, and such conflicts can turn already fragile States into incubators of transnational threats, including terrorism and trafficking in arms or drugs. Development and security are inextricably linked… (S/PV.6360 (2010): 20).*

Fragile states had become a cause and a result of instability because these states were seen as either particularly vulnerable to transnational causes of instability – terrorism, migration and climate change – or as exacerbating already-existing insecurity and war. Regardless of the problem, however, it was Western-led or -dominated interventions that were presented as most likely to save the populations living within these political entities, but also to counter instability and conflict that directly or indirectly could pose a threat to global stability.[41] Put squarely, the fragile state label is used to legitimise strong states' supposedly benevolent protection of states that are considered unable to govern themselves. As such, it reasserts a hierarchy between non-Western states and (idealised)

39 DANIDA (2012) 'Effective statebuilding? A review of evaluations of international statebuilding support in fragile contexts'. 2012/3, p. 5.

40 See for example E/2007/SR.8 (2007)); A/C.2/65/SR.13 (2010); A/66/66 – E/2011/78 (2011)).

41 Maria-Louise Clausen (2019), 'Justifying military intervention: Yemen as a failed state'. Third World Quarterly 40(3): 488–502, p. 488.

Western states as the latter maintain the prerogative – as the inventors of the notion of fragile states – to select and apply the indicators that justify interventions across the Global South.[42]

Since the early 2000s the notion of the fragile state has not only been criticised by academics but certainly also by policymakers for being overly state-centric, which resulted in attempts to construe alternative frameworks of analysis. The OECD has played a key role in this process to ensure a more multidimensional understanding of both the state and fragility. For instance, the multi-layered approach, emerging in the mid-2000s in the context of security-related programming, suggested that rather than provide support to security and justice organisations narrowly tied to the state, a wide range of non-state actors such as traditional leaders and vigilante groups must be engaged in defining security concerns and how to respond to them. As the OECD suggested in 2007: 'What fragile state justice and security delivery requires… is a multi-layered approach. It is a methodology that is highly context-specific, targeting donor assistance to those providers – state and non-state actors simultaneously – at the multiple points at which actual day-to-day service delivery occurs'.[43] In the process, the fragile state concept itself has evolved. One example of this is the emergence of 'fragile situations', which expands the notion of fragility as a condition that potentially affects all areas of life and paves the way for ever-more invasive and expansive interventions, where notions of 'risk' and 'coping capacity' introduce new layers of ambiguity and more discretionary power to the intervener.[44]

> 'The OECD characterises fragility as the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, systems and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks. Fragility can lead to negative outcomes including violence, poverty, inequality, displacement, and environmental and political degradation'.
>
> OECD (2020) *States of Fragility.*

[42] Beth Thiessen (2015) 'Conceptualizing the "failed state": the construction of the failed state discourse'. *University of Saskatchewan Undergraduate Research Journal* 1(2): 129–139.

[43] OECD (2007) 'Enhancing the Delivery of Justice and Security'. Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. For a discussion of the relationship between state and non-state in policy and programme work, see Peter Albrecht & Helene M. Kyed (2010) 'Justice and security: when the state isn't the main provider'. DIIS Policy Brief: Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies; Peter Albrecht, Helene Maria Kyed, Deborah Isser & Erica Harper (2011) *Perspectives on Involving Non-State and Customary Actors in Justice and Security Reform*. Rome and Copenhagen: International Development Law Organization and Danish Institute for International Studies.

[44] Nicholas Lemay-Hébert (2019) 'From saving failed states to managing risks: reinterpreting fragility through resilience'. In John Idriss Lahai, Karin von Strokirch, Howard Brasted & Helen Ware (eds.) *Governance and Political Adaptation in Fragile States*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 75–101, p. 77.

Labels matter: they are deeply relational and political and they can be exploited in the interests of those who apply them, especially when they represent poorly defined concepts. Therefore, using notions of failed and fragile to categorise states across the Global South cannot be dissociated from international hierarchies. Not only are they inherently Eurocentric, establishing a measurement against the Weberian-Western state governed according to liberal-democratic principles as the standard political entity that other states' performance is compared to;[45] they are also a judgment of 'the other', i.e. the Global South, and ultimately one among many instruments that serve to shape and enhance the legitimacy of a broad range of Western-led reforms, including SSR.

SECURITISATION OF THE FRAGILE STATE CONCEPT

Security has been part of the policy understanding of fragile states from the outset. In turn, the 'New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States', signed in 2011, refers to security as one of five peacebuilding and statebuilding goals.[46] Thus, safeguarding peace agreements, demobilising combatants, establishing legitimate security forces, and post-conflict justice and reconciliation are all considered foundational to interventions targeting fragile states. At the same time development was gradually subsumed by Western states' security concerns, including terrorism and migration, which have been cast as transnational threats.[47] In turn, strong states were considered bulwarks against terrorism and global chaos, which has led Western states to prioritise support to establishing or re-establishing security in some shape or form. This resulted in the emergence of security sector reform (SSR) as a development strategy to transform fragile and post-conflict states into 'effective' and 'legitimate' political entities in order to prevent them from relapsing into war. In this way, SSR became an important item on the state-building agenda and integral to 'the process of restoring (or building) the functionality of state institutions'.[48] Key donors such as the OECD, UN and EU assumed that to improve state effectiveness in the security domain through train-and-equip would fail without corresponding governance improvements.[49] However, donors have had relatively little success in the places where they have supported comprehensive SSR processes, and have often focused on conflict-

[45] Nay (2013) 'Fragile and Failed States'.

[46] https://g7plus.org/attach-pdf/A%20NEW%20DEAL%20for%20engagement%20in%20fragile%20states.pdf

[47] The Danish Peace and Stabilisation Fund (PSF) reflects the push towards combining civilian and military instruments to address conflicts in fragile states. See also Lemay-Hébert, Nicolas. 'From Saving Failed States to Managing Risks: Reinterpreting Fragility Through Resilience'. In *Governance and Political Adaptation in Fragile States*, edited by John Idriss Lahai, Karin von Strokirch, Howard Brasted & Helen Ware, 75–101. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019.

[48] UN and World Bank, *Joint Guidance Note on Integrated Recovery Planning Using Post-Conflict Needs Assessment and Transitional Results Frameworks* (September 2007), accessed at https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/39214-doc-168._joint_guidance_note-for_pcna_and_transitional_results_frameworks_trfs.pdf

[49] Dylan Hendrickson (2009) 'Key challenges facing security sector reform: a case for reframing the donor policy debate'. GFN-SSR Working Paper, Birmingham. University of Birmingham.

prevention security sector assistance as part of general development cooperation instead.[50]

Since the early 2000s the link between fragile states and terrorism has led to a growing focus on counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) initiatives. This has been combined with capacity-building of recipient countries' security institutions to enable fragile states to manage their own security.[51] Thus, what the US initially dubbed the 'War on Terror' has given elites of fragile states the opportunity to present themselves as a bulwark against terrorism and general disorder. This has been used to justify large military budgets and lobby external actors for arms and military support. Not infrequently have these resources been used to maintain or reinforce exploitative or abusive institutions.[52]

In the next two sections, we provide insights into how failure and fragility as policy concepts have guided interventions in Somalia and Iraq, specifically with respect to SSR.

ONLY SKIN-DEEP? POLITICS BEFORE SSR IN SOMALIA

Somalia experienced a bureaucratic collapse when civil war broke out in 1988 and has since been portrayed as the epitome of a failed state.[53] Take, for instance, the following quote from the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on a visit to the UN Security Council in 2011:

As this Council knows well, the international community… has to deal with failed states where warlords and criminal gangs prevent the establishment of the rule of law. In these situations, we should focus first on ensuring stability and security as the basis for any economic and social development. There are several cases around the world where the international community is working to build functioning States where current structures fall short. Somalia is a clear example.[54]

It is the representation of Somalia as such, and the continuous iteration of 'gradual, if fragile, progress'[55] – a common phrase used to legitimise the

[50] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (2012) 'Effective statebuilding? A review of evaluations of international statebuilding support in fragile contexts 2012/3', p. 21.

[51] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Justice (2013) 'Denmark's integrated stabilisation engagement in fragile and conflict-affected areas of the world, Denmark, Copenhagen, pp. 12 and 19.

[52] Call (2008) 'The fallacy of the "failed state"', p. 1497; Fisher (2014) 'When it Pays to be a "Fragile State"', p. 316.

[53] H-M. Loubser and H. Solomon (2014) 'Responding to state failure in Somalia'. *Africa Review* 6(1): 1–17; V. Luling (1997) 'Come back Somalia? Questioning a collapsed state'. *Third World Quarterly* 18(2): 287–302; R.I. Rotberg (2003) 'Failed states, collapsed states, weak states: causes and indicators'. In R.I. Rotberg (ed.) *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1–25, p. 10.

[54] United Nations Security Council, 6477th meeting, Tuesday 8 February 2011, S/PV.6477.

[55] UNSOM, 13 September 2017, SRSG Keating Briefing to the Security Council, https://unsom.unmissions.org/srsg-keating-briefing-security-council-1.

international community's continued presence in Somalia, while emphasising the difficulties of making headway[56] – that dominate discussions of the country. Together, they reflect the underlying – and often unspoken – rationale that conflict and its implications open up a path to building democratic institutions from scratch. Like in other countries emerging from war, this has guided many, often uncoordinated and until now largely unsuccessful interventions to stabilise Somalia by individual governments and international organisations.[57] The concept ignores dynamics inherent to a more sinister and indirect geopolitical battle between Western, Middle Eastern and East African actors that seek to control and contain Somali politics.[58] Most efforts have centred on the capital, Mogadishu, while little headway has been made to establish a centrally governed political entity within a federated state system. Certainly, as will be emphasised below, the notions of fragility and failure have very little explanatory value with respect to understanding the complexities of the contemporary Somali landscape, but they have been used to categorise the country, and in the process position it for intervention.

While a central government was formed in Mogadishu in September 2012 after more than 20 years of conflict, there has been limited progress on establishing a constitution, the legal basis of the state. Relations between the federal government and member states have been tentative (South West State, Hir-Shabelee), at times antagonistic (Puntland, Jubaland), and certainly unclear. These differences on the one hand relate to the clan system that often has a state-like function[59] and on the other hand to a president in Mogadishu, Mohamed Abdullahi 'Farmaajo' Mohamed, who is pursuing a nationalist agenda.[60] Until Farmaajo came to power, Jubaland and Puntland, populated by different sub-clans of Darood, kept their distance from the Hawiye-dominated federal government. However, Farmaajo and people around him have proven to be not just nationalist–populist, but excessively centralist in their approach to member states, and willing to use the security forces at their disposal to influence electoral processes in favour of candidates who are loyal to the government in Villa Somalia, the seat of government in Mogadishu. Whatever goodwill Farmaajo may have had when he came to power in 2017 has therefore dissipated in the eyes of Somalia's regional leaders, such as Madobe in Jubaland, while his nationalist stance has made him

[56] A formulation along similar lines in a letter (S/2016/82) dated 29 September 2016 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 751 (1992) and 1907 (2009), concerning Somalia and Eritrea: 'After more than two decades of turmoil and being seen as a failed State, Somalia continues to be on a positive, albeit delicate, trajectory towards peace and stability'.

[57] M. Bryden & J. Brickhill (2010) 'Disarming Somalia: lessons in stabilisation from a collapsed state: analysis'. *Conflict, Security & Development* 10(2): 239–262; T. Hagmann (2016) *Stabilization, Extraversion and Political Settlements in Somalia*. London: Rift Valley Institute; K. Menkhaus (2007) 'The crisis in Somalia: tragedy in five acts'. *African Affairs* 106(204): 357–390. K. Menkhaus (2014) 'State failure, state-building and prospects for a "Functional Failed State" in Somalia'. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 656(1): 154–172.

[58] Brendon J. Cannon & Federico Donelli, 12 May 2021, 'Somalia's electoral impasse and the role of Middle East states'. Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), https://bit.ly/3rBXSkI.

[59] This observation is based on more than a dozen interviews with Somalis in Eastleigh, Nairobi, during January 2022.

[60] Interview, researcher in Somaliland, Nairobi, January 2022.

popular among many other Somalis.[61] To the frustration of the UN Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), officially representing the international community in the country, the attempt to move forward with the formulation of a Somali constitution, has therefore not progressed noticeably.

A 2017 National Security Architecture and a New Policing Model, both formulated under considerable international pressure, assigned primary responsibility for domestic security, including counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, to the member states. However, in May 2018 the federal government issued a new Somalia Transition Plan and dismissed the previous agreements in an attempt to take all security functions back to the federal level. Under the Transition Plan, Villa Somalia systematically obstructed security assistance to the federal member states and funnelled resources almost exclusively to the federal forces. These manoeuvres took place without a constitution, making it a matter of interpretation how power and resources should be divided within Somalia's federal system.

Even though no legal basis to guide the design of a national security architecture is in place, individual governments and multilateral organisations have initiated countless more or less covert SSR and force assistance initiatives. The UN has attempted to coordinate the international community, as it is mandated to do, in the efforts to provide support to the federal government. However, SSR programmes have as a general rule responded more to the foreign and domestic policy aims of the individual contributors and visions of statehood than necessarily to Somalia's needs. Because of Somalia's geopolitical importance, key players across North America, Europe and the Middle East in particular are thus pursuing national interests and directly and indirectly clashing over how Somalia, and notably Somalia's security sector, should be organised and governed.[62]

The National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) is a case in point; it has received considerable financial and technical support from Qatar, which has transformed NISA into a functioning intelligence service, and 'the secretive core of Villa Somalia's power'.[63] Two Turkish-trained units within NISA – army special forces and paramilitary police officers – have both been equipped with Turkish produced weapons and armoured vehicles. NISA also has two units trained and mentored by the US to protect NISA facilities and serve as a counterterrorism commando unit, respectively. In all three cases, national preferences and goals of the donor countries ensure that the needs of certain security actors are prioritised over others. This is the reason why most support from the US is focused on counter-terrorism efforts to fight Al-Shabaab. Another example is the United Arab Emirates that engaged in Somalia to build up a Somali special forces unit in

[61] Interview, high-level official in Jubaland (Somalia), Nairobi, January 2022.

[62] Interview, senior officer in UNSOM, November 2021.

[63] Matt Bryden, 8 November 2021, 'Fake Fight: The Quiet Jihadist Takeover of Somalia'. *The Elephant*, https://bit.ly/33H7vqo.

Mogadishu, originally to use in its war effort in Yemen, an idea that was later dropped.[64]

Initiatives within the Somali security sector have at best been disjointed and are often internally self-contradictory. The kind of SSR that dominates the policy discourse of most bilateral donors – commonly from the Global North – and inter-governmental organisations such as the UN and World Bank reflects the concerns and worldview of liberal democracies such as Germany and the UK.[65] But, as outlined in this section, these countries do not dictate interventions in and developments of Somalia's security sector any more than do UAE and Turkey, in an inherently complex security set-up. Indeed, Somali non-state armed groups remain stronger than the nascent state security forces, often intersecting freely with the national army and police,[66] making it unclear which security actors precisely – state or non-state – are given support.

In sum, much support provided to the Somali security sector at the federal level essentially plays into the political interests of Farmaajo and supports his agenda of centralising power in Villa Somalia. This weakens the member states and dismantles the federal structures mandated by the Provisional Constitution, especially the federal police forces. Forces trained and equipped by foreign powers have been used by Farmaajo to control the outcome of elections in a number of states. In Galmudug's elections in February 2020 and Hirshabelle's in November that same year, federal financing backed by the deployment of loyalist, Turkish-trained special forces and paramilitary police helped to ensure that Villa Somalia's candidates were victorious. Moreover, while international presence in Somalia, especially of Western powers, has been predicated on the fight against Al-Shabaab, central figures in Villa Somalia like NISA's Fahad Yasin, backed by Qatar, are pushing for a more extreme and intolerant form of Islam. These political trends in Villa Somalia confirm why externally-driven SSR, especially as envisioned in the Global North, has little to no chance of succeeding at this moment in Somalia. They also emphasise why the failed or fragile state concept has no explanatory value when it comes to comprehending what is happening in Somalia – and what to do about it, if anything.

IRAQ – FAILED STATE OR FAILED INTERVENTIONS?

The 2003 intervention in Iraq was a consequence of the new strategic assumption that emerged following 9/11 that saw US security as inextricably linked to state failure. Thus, the Western, US-led, policy towards Iraq since 2003 illustrates how

[64] Colin D. Robinson (2021) 'Rebuilding armies in southern Somalia: what currently should donors realistically aim for?' *Conflict, Security & Development* 21(3): 313–336.

[65] Alice Hills (2014) 'Security sector or security arena? The evidence from Somalia'. *International Peacekeeping* 21(2): 165–180, p. 167.

[66] K. Menkhaus (2016) 'Non-State Security Providers and Political Formation in Somalia'. *CSG Papers* No. 5, April 2016.

development has become not just securitised but subordinated to security. It reflects the belief that military interventions could concentrate sovereign power in a central government and build nations free from ethnic, tribal, and religious fragmentation.[67] This has made the Iraqi case paradigmatic of how interventions by external actors cannot be separated from the definition of some states as fragile.

Iraq was only described as a failed state after the US-led military intervention in 2003. For example, in 2004 then Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, argued that 'Iraq is not a failed state'; a statement that he linked to his confidence in Iraq being 'able to resume its rightful place among the family of nations'.[68] The implication here being that Iraq was momentarily placed in the failed state category, but as an exception due to external circumstances. To avoid this happening again, the international community initiated a massive and securitised nation-building process in Iraq in the 2000s.[69] The goal was to re-integrate Iraq into the 'family of nations' as a democratic liberal state by dissolving existing institutions and building new ones in the image of Western states.[70] This informed the decision to disband the Iraqi security apparatus in 2003 as the US sought to rebuild a US-trained professional army. According to an audit of the post-conflict reconstruction in Iraq, more than $20 billion were spend on direct support for the Iraqi security forces from 2006 to 2011.[71] Large numbers of Iraqis were rushed through training programmes and provided with equipment so that they could quickly assume security functions. However, the number of soldiers trained did not provide an accurate picture of the capability of the Iraqi security forces.[72] The transferral of powers back to Iraqis prioritised expediency and therefore came to rely on existing parties and groups formed along sectarian and ethic identities. This institutionalised factionalism and undermined the capabilities of the Iraqi security forces. These structural weaknesses can, at least partly, explain why the Iraqi security forces, although far outnumbering fighters from Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL) or Daesh, dissipated in June 2014. Or, in other words, the collapse of the Iraqi security forces in 2014 is a testimony to the failure of the US-led security sector reform between 2003 and 2014.[73]

Following the defeat of Daesh in 2017, the Iraqi security forces have emerged as a more legitimate and capable organisation. In a recent survey we found that more

[67] Jake Sherman (2010) 'The "Global War on Terrorism" and its implication for US Security Sector Reform Support'. In Mark Sedra (ed.), *The Future of Security Sector Reform* (Ottawa: Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2010), 59–73.

[68] S/PV.4984 (2004), UNSC.

[69] Toby Dodge (2006) 'Iraq: The contradictions of exogenous state-building in historical perspective'. *Third World Quarterly* 27(1): 187–200; Shamiran Mako & Alistair D. Edgar (2021) 'Evaluating the pitfalls of external statebuilding in post-2003 Iraq (2003–2021)'. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15(4): 425–440.

[70] Andrew Rathmell et al. 2006. 'Developing Iraq's Security Sector. The Coalition Provisional Experience'. RAND Corporation.

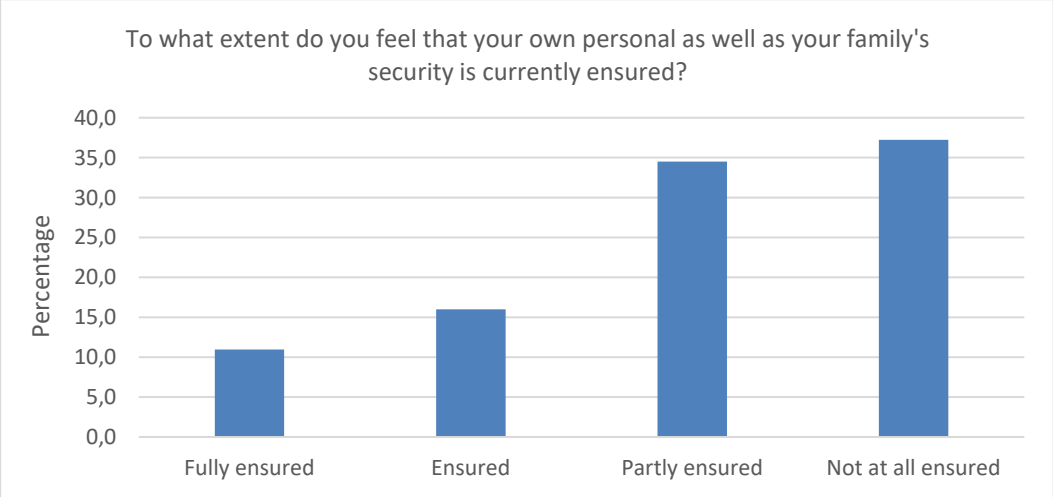
[71] United States Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (2013) 'Learning from Iraq', pp. 149.

[72] Mark Sedra (2007) 'Security sector reform in Afghanistan and Iraq: exposing a concept in crisis'. *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 3(2): 7–23; Christoph Wolcke (2006) 'A hard place: The United States and the creation of a new security apparatus in Iraq'. *Civil Wars* 8 (2): 124–142.

[73] Andreas Krieg (2014) 'ISIS success in Iraq: a testimony to failed security sector reform'. Centre for Security Governance, July 2014.

than 60 per cent of Iraqis pointed to the Iraqi security forces as the most trusted national institution.[74] But despite the formal defeat of ISIL in 2017, ISIL continues to constitute a threat as Iraq remains IS' centre of operations. Indeed, there was an uptick in attacks from 2019 to 2020, primarily small-scale attacks on civilian and military targets.[75] ISIL carried out an estimated 211 attacks between 1 January–31 March 2021, with most of these attacks in Diyala, followed by Salah al-Din, North Baghdad, Kirkuk, Anbar and Ninewa.[76] Hence, although ISIL is not threatening the Iraqi state as it did in 2014, and the Iraqi Government and Western actors rightly underscore that the security situation is much improved, most Iraqis do not feel safe.[77]

Figure 2. Perceptions of personal security in Iraq in 2021[78]



The continued presence of Islamic State in Iraq, and the potentiality of ISIL regaining its ability to threaten international security informs the continued involvement of Western security actors in Iraq. It is, however, not just ISIL that challenges the security situation in Iraq. Whereas large-scale attacks have become fewer, assassinations, kidnappings and intimidation of anyone challenging the status quo remain a substantial threat. The so-called Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) or al-Hashd al-Shabi in particular threatens the legitimacy and coherency of

[74] Maria-Louise Clausen (2021) 'Providing security in Iraq – what do Iraqis think?' *DIIS Policy Brief*, 27 April 2021.

[75] UNDP (2020) 'Funding Facility for Stabilization 2020 Annual Report', p. 7.

[76] https://www.iq.undp.org/content/iraq/en/home/library/democratic_governance/public-perception-survey-on-local-safety-and-security-in-iraq.html

[77] Clausen (2021) 'Providing security in Iraq - what do Iraqis think?'; Maria-Louise Clausen & Ekatherina Zhukova (2021) 'Making women count, not just counting women', *DIIS Policy Brief*, 31 May 2021.

[78] This is from a nationally representative survey where 1,606 interviews were conducted by the Independent Institute of Administration and Civil Society Studies (IIACSS), which is the only representative body of GALLUP in Iraq. The interviews are proportionate across Iraq's 18 governorates, and are gender and age balanced. Due to COVID-19 restrictions the survey was carried out by phone, using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). Data collection was done in early 2021.

the Iraqi security forces and the stability of the Iraqi state.[79] Some of the most powerful PMFs have close links to Iran. Despite the formal prohibition of militias in Iraq and the inclusion of the Hashd in the security forces, the Iran-backed PMFs in some cases operate outside state control.[80] Iran has been able to exploit the aspirations and resentments of Iraqi Shias to increase its influence over Iraqi politics.[81] However, since 2019 Iraqis have increasingly turned against all forms of external intervention to use the notion of national identity to challenge the Iraqi internal elite and political status quo.[82]

But despite marked improvements in the capability and legitimacy of the Iraqi security forces, structural and organisational weaknesses continue to undermine the social contract in Iraq and the establishment of long-term stability. [83] The close integration between politics and security complicates international support to build the capacity of the Iraqi security forces. The involvement of Western actors such as the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in SSR is highly political, both domestically and in how it affects Iraq's relationship to its neighbours, especially Iran. This is reflected in diminished appetite for large-scale interventions, leading to a turn away from state-building towards stabilisation. Stabilisation has limited transformative ambitions and has particularly focused on countering the threat that instability in Iraq supposedly poses to the West.[84] This has led to a focus on train-and-equip programming, supplemented with targeted military interventions aimed at Daesh, while concerns for normative issues such as rule of law, democracy and human rights slip down the list of priorities.[85] Simultaneously, the focus on internal terrorism has led to limited attention to building the Iraqi security forces' ability to defend Iraq against external enemies, community-based policing or arms control.[86]

In sum, international intervention has played a substantial role in how Iraq became a fragile state and although some lessons have been learned since 2003, international actors such as the US, NATO and the UN continue to struggle with navigating in the complex and sometimes hostile Iraqi context. This underscores how SSR cannot be isolated from the political – or historical – context in which it takes place. The challenge is to institutionalise and build on the professionalisation

[79] Maria-Louise Clausen (2019) 'Breaking the cycle: Iraq following the military defeat of Islamic State', *DIIS Report*, 2019: 2

[80] Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik & Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi (2020) 'Honored but contained. The future of Iraq's popular mobilization forces'. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policy Focus* 163.

[81] Maria-Louise Clausen (2020) 'The potential of nationalism in Iraq: caught between domestic repression and external co-optation'. *POMEPS Studies 38*, Sectarianism and International Relations, pp. 24–28.

[82] Fanar Haddad (2019) 'The diminishing relevance of the Sunni-Shi'a divide'. *POMEPS Studies 35*, October 2019.

[83] Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Danish Ministry of Defence, Programme Document, 'Syria and Iraq Peace and Stabilisation Programme' (2019–2021), p. 37.

[84] Roberto Belloni & Irene Costantini (2019) 'From liberal statebuilding to counterinsurgency and stabilization: the international intervention in Iraq'. *Ethnopolitics* 18(5): 509–525.

[85] Belloni & Costantini (2019) 'From liberal statebuilding to counterinsurgency and stabilization'.

[86] United Nations Development Programme Iraq. Support to Security Sector Reform – Phase I. 'Final Narrative Project Report (2013–2015)'. https://info.undp.org/docs/pdc/Documents/IRQ/SSR%20Phase%20-1%20Final%20Narrative%20Report.pdf.

achieved in some parts of the Iraqi security sector, while integrating elements that have a record of taking their orders from Tehran rather than Baghdad and of showing limited respect for international humanitarian law.

ARE THERE REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN HOW THE FRAGILE STATE CONCEPT IS APPLIED?

The cases analysed above – Somalia and Iraq – show how the designation of a state as either failed or fragile has been and continues to be used to categorise and frame particular sets of challenges and responses in very diverse contexts. In short, the terms help to establish a logic and a rationale, legitimising the need for intervention.

At the same time, Somalia's and Iraq's paths to state failure are framed differently. Somalia is presented as a country in which, due to civil war, the central government and state institutions disintegrated.[87] While in the 1990s Somalia threw a shadow over the UN's internationally (Western) perceived ability to turn failed states around,[88] it has nevertheless been emphasised that Somalia continues to need the help of the international community, because 'there is no such thing as a failed society'.[89] With this emphasis on society rather than state, the people of Somalia are pointed to as able to spearhead a positive transformation – with the help of the international community, the West.[90] The threat from al-Shabaab is considered a result of state failure, and therefore to be countered with a focus on humanitarian aid and support for development.

Iraq is less frequently referred to as fragile or failed but interventions in the country have played a key role in securitising the fragile state concept. Iraq's failure was *caused* by an international military intervention, making it less unequivocal to speak of Iraq as needing the help of the international community. Rather, Iraq is referred to as a fragile state in the context of terrorist threats and military efforts to counter Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.[91] Development assistance, for example jobs and opportunities for young people, is instrumentalised to provide alternatives to engaging in terrorism.[92] As such, the last two decades of military, humanitarian and development interventions in Iraq illustrate how the War on Terror definitively securitised the fragile state concept.

[87] S/PV.3641.
[88] S/PV.3641 (1996); A/53/PV.12 (1998).
[89] S/PV.4487 (2002).
[90] S/PV.6965 (2013), S/PV6975 (2013).
[91] S/PV.7670 (Resumption 1) (2016).
[92] S/PV.7690 (2016).

A side effect of this has been to make it harder for states that do not pose a security threat to the West to become a development priority.[93]

Somalia and Iraq are key examples of how the failed state and fragile state agendas have been used for different purposes in different contexts but led to similar results: justifying interventions in the interest of Western security. The Middle East and Africa dominate the top of standard rankings of fragile states, such as the Fragile States Index. In 2020 the OECD designated 57 countries and territories as fragile or extremely fragile,[94] which illustrates the extensive coverage of the concepts. Africa and the Middle East are clearly overrepresented with four extremely fragile contexts in the Middle East and eight in Sub-Saharan Africa (Haiti is in this regard the only geographical exception). The Fragile State Index, along with similar rankings such as the World Bank's Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations (FSC) list,[95] and the Fund for Peace Fragile State Index (FSI)[96] do not differentiate between the Middle East and Africa in terms of indicators. However, the fact that the label is mainly incorporated into analyses of Africa south and north of the Sahara and the Middle East emphasises how the label invariably supports the establishment of global hierarchies among states. As illustrated by the cases of Iraq and Somalia, interventions in both settings, despite their substantial differences, are construed around limited reach of the central governments, which justifies intervention, whether military or humanitarian. At the same time, while the fragile state concept is used for different types of interventions in Africa and the Middle East, the vagueness of the concept is illustrated by just how difficult it is to discern anything common about the types of interventions justified through the same language. Finally, they shed limited to no light on the dynamics within the countries that are intervened in, which often is not the point, because interventions predominantly serve the geopolitical interests of the interveners, especially when it comes to the security sector.

CONCLUSION

The fragile – more than the failed – state label has proven exceptionally resilient as an instrument for policy analysis and intervention. It has adapted to both gradual and more radical changes in how development, conflict and security are understood from the perspective of the West, dating back from the immediate aftermath of the Cold War to the War on Terror and up until today.[97] We argue

[93] N. Suntharalingam (2010) 'The UN Security Council, regional arrangements, and peacekeeping operations'. In H. Charlesworth & J. Coicaud (eds.), *Fault Lines of International Legitimacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 204–238.

[94] OECD (2020) 'States of Fragility' https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/ba7c22e7-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/ba7c22e7-en)

[95] The World Bank Group, 'Classification of Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations'. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/brief/harmonized-list-of-fragile-situations

[96] The Fund for Peace, 'Fragile States Index'. Comes out yearly and is available at: https://fragilestatesindex.org/

[97] Clausen & Albrecht (2021) 'Interventions since the Cold War'.

that this ultimately reflects the concept's vacuous character, which makes it politically flexible rather than a precise diagnostic tool. The OECD refers to almost one in three states as fragile – on the one hand including the diversity of contexts affected by fragility, and on the other describing the many dimensions of fragility in each context.[98] This flexibility, which allows those in power to pick and choose which indicators to prioritise in a given context, accentuates the concept's political usefulness in justifying a broad range of interventions in diverse contexts. It justifies interventions on humanitarian grounds, but in countries that often are prioritised because they are seen as impacting directly or indirectly on Western security.

In the first part of this paper, we have shown how the failed state entered policy and academic debates in the early 1990s. Initially, the failed state term was used for states that had completely collapsed, such as Somalia in the 1990s, and therefore were in need of comprehensive international support. It was quickly superseded by the fragile state concept. This concept was broader and could therefore be used to justify interventions in a much wider range of states and for an equally wide number of reasons. As the concept was formalised in policy discussions, it was linked to conflict, and by extension discussions of global security, in many cases a euphemism for Western security. More recently, new understandings of fragility that seek to decentre fragility from the state have further expanded an already expansive concept. This illustrates its dynamic nature as meanings constantly evolve and develop to suit the political agendas of those who define them.

In the second part of the working paper, we traced how the notions of failed and fragile states have been enmeshed in the rationale for intervention in Somalia and Iraq, specifically their security sectors. The two cases illustrate that the fragile state concept has been used in very diverse circumstances to justify international engagement, but also its definitive shortcomings when it comes to truly comprehending dynamics within the two countries. In short, it labels and judges rather than explains, and thereby captures little of the specific knowledge that is required to gain an understanding of the contexts that are being intervened in. The result in both Somalia and Iraq has been to subordinate the interests of the populations that these interventions allegedly are taking place in support of, to the interests of the international community.

The introduction of the failed state concept was used to suggest a more systematic and intrusive approach to development in a post-Cold War world that the West (and Western values) appeared to have won. Now, the importance attached to fragile states reflects that these states pose serious problems, first and foremost for their own populations but also globally. We do not challenge this here but rather we are questioning the utility of the fragility agenda in development. As there are no real solutions emanating from the label of fragility, but principally a judgment based on political organisation in the West, we do not suggest an alternative

[98] OECD (2020) 'States of Fragility'.

general framework of analysis, because it would simply replicate the maladies of the fragile state concept. The fact that current concepts and tools do a poor job of understanding how and when some states that were seemingly stable collapse into disarray or civil war should not lead to the development of new, all-encompassing, concepts and indicators. Rather, it should inspire a more fundamental discussion of the utility of the fragility concept in policy circles, but also more widely the purpose of interventions, indeed whether they in some cases should be undertaken at all. Certainly, greater context-sensitivity is required as is openness to forms of governance that differ from the liberal democratic model. This should be done in a way that challenges how we hierarchise the world with our concepts and that helps us – the West – recognise the limitations of our *and* others' intervention practices.