

State Failure and the Political Violence Phenomenon: A Comparative Analysis of Iraq and Syria Cases

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Abstract

The concept of failed state came to the fore with the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the USSR and the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Political violence is central in these discussions on the definition of the concept or the determination of its dimensions (indicators). Specifically, the level of political violence, the type of political violence and intensity of political violence has been broached in the literature. An effective classification of political violence can lead us to a better understanding of state failure phenomenon. By using Tilly's classification of collective violence which is based on extent of coordination among violent actors and salience of short-run damage, the role played by political violence in state failure can be understood clearly. In order to do this, two recent cases, Iraq and Syria will be examined.

Keywords: state failure, political violence, Syria, Iraq

Introduction

The concept of state failure was used for the first time by Gerald B. Helman and Steven R. Ratner¹. While it is possible to see the emergence and failure of the nation states for so long, the concept of failed state came to the fore with the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the USSR and the disintegration of Yugoslavia, because these moments made possible the emergence of new nation-states. According to Andrew Flibbert², the concept was borrowed from the economy and in particular was inspired by the concept of market failure. Then it was adopted in the discussions of political science in the 1990s.

In their article entitled "Saving Failed States", Herman and Ratner speak of the emergence of "*the failed-nation-state, utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community*".³ According to the authors, the reasons for state failure are "civil strife, government breakdown and economic privation"⁴. According to Michael Ignatieff⁵ state failure takes place when states can no longer have the legitimate monopoly of violence (Ignatieff, 2002). Robert Rotberg⁶ defines state failure by the ability to deliver positive public goods. A failed state can not deliver these goods and gradually loses its legitimacy before its citizens. According to Rotberg "*a failed state is a polity that is no longer able or willing to perform the fundamental jobs of a nation-state in the modern world*".⁷ He therefore suggests that the state failure should be understood as a point in a "continuum". In one extreme side of this continuum there are strong states and in another extreme side there

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¹ Gerald B. Helman and Steven R. Ratner, « Saving Failed States », *Foreign Policy*, n°89, 1992-1993, pp. 3-20.

² Andrew Flibbert, « The consequences of Forces State Failure in Iraq », *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 128 n°1, 2013, pp.70.

³ Helman and Ratner, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Michael Ignatieff, « Intervention and State Failure », *Dissent*, Vol. 49, n°1, 2002, pp. 114-123.

⁶ Robert I. Rotberg, « Failed States, Collapsed States, Weak States: Causes and Indicators » in Robert I. Rotberg (ed.) *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror*, Washinton DC, World Peace Foundation/Brookings Institution, 2003, p. 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*

are collapsed states¹. Between two points there are multiple possibilities such as weak states, failing states and failed states.

After seeing these definitions, it is possible to accept, with a few exceptions, Jonathan di John's remark: "Vague and imprecise definitions of failure abound in the literature."² To specify the content of this concept some scholars give indicators of state failure. Rotberg argues that the main difference between the weak and strong states is the levels of their effective delivery of most crucial public goods such as security, especially human security, "the essential freedoms(...), medical and health care, school and educational institution(...), physical infrastructures(...), the arteries of commerce, (...) a money and banking system, a fiscal and institutional context (...), the promotion of civil society and methods of regulating the sharing of the environmental commons."³ He lists the characteristics of strong states as follows: "Strong states offer high levels of security from political and criminal violence, ensure political freedom and civil liberties, and create environments conducive to the growth of economic opportunity. The rule of law prevails. Judges are independent. Road networks are well maintained. Telephones work. Snail mail and e-mail arrive quickly. Schools, universities, and students flourish. Hospitals and clinics serve patients effectively. And so on. Overall, strong states are places of enviable peace and order."⁴

By using the list of political goods delivered by a state Rotberg tries to define state-failure indicators. According to him three types of indicators give us a more distinct picture of the phenomenon. In economical level, reductions in incomes and living standards, increased corruption, fall of GDP, drying of foreign and domestic investment, shortages of food and fuel can be mentioned. In political level one can count the subverted democratic norms, restriction of participatory processes, enslavement of bureaucracy, end of judicial independence, blocking of civil society and subordination of security forces. As for the level of violence, as it rises very rapidly the human security deteriorate. He adds that these indicators should not be taken separately and only their combination will give us a more perfect vision of the phenomenon⁵.

Another work that deals with indicators and is widely cited in the literature is the *State Failure Task Force Report (I and II)*. This task force, composed of independent researchers is established at the request of Vice President Al Gore at the time (1994) by CIA⁶. From 600 variables evaluated, the group opted for a three factor- model. These factors are: "infant mortality-indirect measure of quality of life; openness to international trade-value of imports and exports divided by GDP, level of democracy-from information on political institutions"⁷. The group estimates that they can predict two thirds of state failure cases⁸.

And finally according to Flibbert, the concept of state failure reflects the decrease in the institutional capacity of the state. Even if he did not openly describes as indicators the struggle over the control of territory and the monopoly of violence, the decline and even the fall of the bureaucratic state capacity and declining revenues from taxes and the decline in the promotion of economic well-being and equity can be considered like this⁹.

In the light of these debates on the definition of the concept or the determination of its dimensions (indicators), political violence is central in these discussions. Specifically, the level of political violence, the type of political violence and intensity of political violence has been broached in the literature. There is a wealth of work on determining whether a state fails due

¹ Flibbert, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

² Jonathan Di John, « The Concept, Causes and Consequences of Failed States: A Critical Review of the Literature and Agenda for Research with Specific Reference to Sub-Saharan Africa », *European Journal of Development Research*, Vol. 22, n° 1, 2010, pp. 15.

³ Rotberg, *op.cit.*, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Rotberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

⁶ This working group is composed of Daniel C. Esty, Jack A. Goldstone, Ted Robert Gurr, Barbara Harff, Marc Levy, Geoffrey D. Dabelko, Pamela T. Surko and Alan N. Unger. Daniel C. Esty, Jack Goldstone, Ted Robert Gurr, Pamela T. Surko, and Alan N. Unger, Working Papers: *State Failure Task Force Report*, McLean, VA: Science Applications International Corporation, 1995 and Daniel C. Esty, Jack Goldstone, Ted Robert Gurr, Pamela T. Surko, Alan N. Unger, and Robert S. Chen, *The State Failure Task Force Report: Phase II Findings* McLean, VA: Science Applications International Corporation, 1998.

⁷ Esty et al. *The State Failure Task Force Report: Phase II Findings*, *op.cit.*, p.50

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Flibbert, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

to terrorism and if this was the case, it would be to what extent¹. It is important to highlight the fact that the violence indicator can be the cause as well as the consequence of the state failure.² Bridget L. Coggins points out three weaknesses of the literature on the relationship between state failure and terrorism. "First, poverty or human insecurity, has received disproportionate attention even though there are good reasons to suspect that other aspects of failure might be more important. Second, "terrorism as war" in cases of guerilla war and insurgency is not controlled for, likely leading to poor estimates of the relationship between failure and terrorism. And third, terrorism is often endogenous to state failure when more comprehensive operationalizations are employed, making the true relationship between two phenomena difficult to discern³."

In addition to these weaknesses, there is a lack of systematic classification of political violence. However an effective classification of political violence can lead us to a better understanding of state failure phenomenon. By using Tilly's⁴ classification of collective violence which is based on extent of coordination among violent actors and salience of short-run damage, the role played by political violence in state failure can be understood clearly. In order to do this, two recent cases, Iraq and Syria will be examined.

Tilly's classification of collective violence:

Charles Tilly classifies collective violence into six categories: violent rituals, coordinated destruction, opportunism, brawls, scattered attacks and broken negotiations by using two variables that is to say extent of coordination among violent actors and salience of short-run damage⁵.

The salience of short run damage demonstrates the extent of damage infliction and reception's domination of these interactions. In the lower part of Figure 1, the damage is rare during interactions while in the upper part of the damage is omnipresent in interactions.

As for the extent of coordination among violent actors, this variable shows the level of coordination amongst those involved in this interaction. At least two people are required for this interaction. In the lower part of Figure 1 coordination is very low as one goes up to the top of the Figure 1, this coordination increases.

The relationship between these two variables and classification of collective violence (interpersonal) are expressed in Figure 1.

These two variables together enable us to predict the degree of destruction that these relations cause. As Tilly puts it: "Broadly speaking destructiveness rises with both salience and coordination. Where salience and coordination both reaches high levels, widespread destruction occurs⁶."

¹ See for example : Edward Newman, « Weak States, State Failure, and Terrorism », *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.19, n°4, 2007, pp.463–488 ; Peter Tikuisis, « On the Relationship between Weak States and Terrorism », *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, Vol. 1, n°1, 2009, pp. 66-79 ; Craig Whiteside « A Case for Terrorism as Genocide in an Era of Weakened States », *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, Vol. 8, n°3, 2015, pp. 232-250 ; Aidan Hehir, « The Myth of the Failed State and the War on Terror: A Challenge to the Conventional Wisdom », *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, Vol. 1, n°3, 2007, pp. 307-332.

² James A. Piazza, "Incubators of Terror: Do Failed and Failing States Promote Transnational Terrorism?" *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, n°3, 2008, pp. 469-488.

³ Bridget L. Coggins, "Does State Failure Cause Terrorism? An Empirical Analysis (1999-2008)", *Journal Of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 59, n°3, 2015, p. 461.

⁴ Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁵ Tilly, *op. cit.*, p.13

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

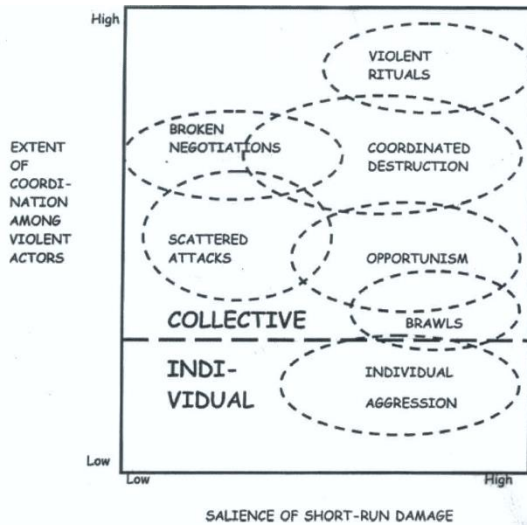


Figure 1.1 A Typology of Interpersonal Violence.

Figure 1: A typology of Interpersonal Violence (Tilly, 2003)

According to Tilly, violent rituals can be described as: “at least one relatively well-defined and coordinated group follows a known interaction script entailing the infliction of damage on itself or others as it competes for priority within a recognized arena; examples include shaming ceremonies, lynchings, public executions, gang rivalries, contact sports, some elections battles, and some struggles among supporters of sporting teams or entertainment stars¹.” Coordinated destruction takes place when “persons, organizations that specialize in the deployment of coercive means undertake a program of damage to persons and/or objects; examples include war, collective self-immolation, some kind of terrorism, genocide and politicide—the programmed annihilation of a political category’s members²” And finally, opportunism occurs when “as a consequence of shielding from routine surveillance and repression, individuals or clusters of individuals use immediately damaging means to pursue generally forbidden ends; examples include looting, gang rape, piracy, revenge killing, and some sorts of military pillage³.”

As part of this research, the cases of Iraq and Syria will be treated. The intertwined nature of political violence in these contexts will allow us to analyze more clearly the state failure situation in these countries.

Intertwined types of political violence

Inspired by the Arab Spring in Tunisia and in Egypt, the first peaceful protests in Syria are born March 15, 2011 to protest the massacre of 15 young people of Deraa who wrote graffiti against the regime. Government repression was brutal. The regime killed more than 200 people between March 15 and April 21, 2011⁴. This revolt deploys quickly from city to city. The Free Syrian Army that became gradually the head of the opposition movement became militarized and its Sunni character came to the fore. Bozarslan speaks of militarization and “sectarianization” of the conflict⁵ However FSA is not only opposition force against al-Assad regime. The Radical Islamist groups are involved including Jabhat al-Nasra (the Victory Front), branch of the Al-Qaida (which has later pledges alliance to ISIS) and Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), now Islamic State, (IS). A civil war is taking place between them. According to Bozarslan “the results of four years of repression is well known: nearly 250,000 dead or missing, murders under torture by the thousands, the use of chemical weapons

¹ *Ibid.*

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Hamit Bozarslan, *Revolution et état de violence. Moyen-Orient 2011-2015*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2015, p. 135.

⁵ Bozarslan, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

*including the utilization of chlorine gas or barrels of oil as a weapon which caused, on August 21, 2013 in Ghouta, near Damascus, the death of 1300 victims, the destruction of many cities such as Aleppo, the exodus of nearly five million people in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and the displacement of six or seven million internally.*¹

The types of violence most used by the regime are the destruction of cities, aerial bombing, torture, disappearances, executions, rape of women, use of chemical weapons, and forced displacement of residents. In opposition's side, we see the passage of a peaceful action repertoire to a militarized violence (especially with the desertion of former officers of the Syrian army even though this view is disputed by some), sectarianized and finally jihadized². One must not forget the fact that ISIS too, uses rape, the sale of women as slaves.

In Iraq, the war launched by the US in 2003 lasts a few months. By this war, the US wanted to destroy alleged chemical, nuclear and biological held by Saddam Hussein. However, after the contested victory of the US, the fall of Saddam Hussein, his execution and the transition to a temporary government, the semblance of stability does not last. Sectarian violence that already existed between Sunni and Shiite starts over again. With the arrival of the ISIL this table becomes bloodier. Besides low intensity guerrilla war declared by USA, there is a civil war. The observed types of violence are:

- Suicide missions: suicide truck bombs, suicide bombers
- Bombings: Car bombings, truck and car bombs (sometimes with toxic chlorine, use of chemical arms).
- Raids against exile camps
- Shootings and gun attacks (especially targeting Shia areas)
- Raids on holy places (Shia shrines and churches)
- dropping barrel bombs
- Executions without trials and tortures.
- Sexual assault, slavery, forced marriages to ISIS members.

In both cases we are in the presence of a war (between two states) and a civil war (between a state and non-state entities) which are examples of coordinated destruction. Because as suggested by Tilly's definition: "*persons, organizations that specialize in the deployment of coercive means undertake a program of damage to persons and/or objects*". In both cases the army, paramilitary groups and militias that can be qualified as violent specialists confront each other in order to gain power over a given territory. As part of this type of collective violence according to Tilly, high extent of coordination and high-salience of damage are expected. In Syrian case, evidence shows very high extent of coordination among government and army. High-salience of damage is evident as Bozarslan puts it: "250. 000 dead or missing" in four years. The Iraqi case shows high coordination among militaries and paramilitary factions like Sunni and Shiite militias such as *Jaysh al-Mahdi* (Mahdi Army). And the damage caused is also very high in this case. According to HRW "*Suicide attacks, car bombs, and assassinations became more frequent and lethal, killing more than 12,000 people and injuring more than 22,000 between January and December.*"³

Another political violence type is opportunism especially, rape, pillage, murder, revenge hostage taking and blood feuds. So we should look for the cases where there is a high-salience violence but low coordination compared to the war and civil war (coordinated destruction). It occurs when routine surveillance and repression fail and few organized individuals use immediately damaging means. In both cases case war and the civil war diminish the surveillance and capacity of repression of regime. State failure in these cases allows individuals to take advantage of this situation. In both cases the militias and

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 138.

² *Op. cit.*, pp.142-143.

³ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2015: Iraq, *Events of 2014*, available online at : <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/iraq>, date accessed:15 March 2016

"ordinary people" resort to rape, pillage, murder, take hostage, revenge and blood feuds. One can see the opportunism most clearly in the case of the kidnapping of children and women and the hostage taking by ISIS in Syrian and Iraqi cases.

Finally, the violent rituals are the type of political violence where we observe the most organized and most violent attacks. The violent specialists, especially pro-regime specialist in Syria used a well-defined script. Bozarslan demonstrate this script as follows: *"the strategy of the regime consists of breaking up the society, forcing the Alawites to renew their allegiance, including through macabre "mise-en-scenes", saving Kurdish cities and villages to avoid the upheaval of Kurdish communities in Aleppo and Damascus, using fear among Christians and massively destroying the Sunni urban space."*¹

The "defined scripts" followed by Nouri Al-Maliki, prime minister at the time was described by Dexter Filkins: *« Since the last American forces departed, he has embarked on a stridently sectarian project aimed at marginalizing the Sunni minority. He has presided over the arrest of his Sunni political opponents, jailed thousands of Sunni men, and excluded the Sunni population from any meaningful role in government. The Sunni Finance Minister, Rafe al-Essawi, fled the capital; the Sunni Vice-President, Tariq al-Hashemi, fled the country and faces a death sentence if he returns. When the Sunnis rose up in anger, as they did in Falluja and elsewhere, Maliki ordered the Army to shell civilian areas and detain more Sunni men. Ever since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraq's Sunnis have been faced with the choice of pledging their allegiance to the Shiite-led government in Baghdad or to the armed groups within their own community. »*²

In both cases, while the war continues, other types of violence such as massacres, rape, pillage, forced immigration killings, seizure of properties, etc. exist. This shows us that war as type of political violence consists of other types of violence that are in a complex way. These intertwined types of collective violence also entail very complex relationships and social interactions. So that even if we have a very detailed chronology in hand, it will be very difficult to separate the various violent episodes corresponding to one or more types of political violence.

Iraq and Syria: Failing, Failed and Forced Failed States?

In the light of these analyses, are Iraqi and Syrian states are "failed" or just weak? Although Flibbert described the situation in Iraq as forced state failure, it is better to use the term "failing states" because this is a process that is never complete and is not finished yet. Using the criteria of Rotberg, one can consider that these states are failing states. In both cases these two states control no longer the monopoly of legitimate violence, territories and no longer deliver public goods to their citizens.

In Syria, the Assad government, pro-government forces, Free Syrian Army the other rebellious factions and jihadist groups such as ISIS show very clearly that the Syrian state no longer has the monopoly of legitimate violence. In addition, the territory is divided and is in the hands of various armed groups including ISIS. The Syrian state can no longer deliver public goods such as security of its population. The increasing number of Syrian immigrants is a substantial example. Other goods are not delivered as roads, hospitals, buildings, schools, other infrastructure are destroyed on a large scale. Entire cities were destroyed either by opposition forces, by the regime or by ISIS. In this case, it will not be illogical to characterize Syria as a failing state.

In Iraq, although there is a government since June 2004, the powers of government seem very limited. The monopoly of violence is no longer in the hands of the state as shown in the rise of sectarian violence in 2012, following the retirement of the American forces. In addition, the return of "ordinary" Iraqis for their security to private security contractors is the second example. Furthermore, control of the territory is a problem with the appearance of ISIS and taking of Mosul and other key towns by ISIS, even if the Iraqi government is gaining territory vis-à-vis ISIS (regaining control of city of Tikrit in April 2015 and Tamim district of Ramadi in December 2015). Aside from the monopoly of legitimate violence and control of the territory, public goods can not be distributed due to failure forced state. Flibbert explains the reasons for this failure in three points: *« First, it nearly destroyed the administrative capacity of the state, requiring the occupation authorities to rebuild in this area while contending with the other major consequences of war. Second the wartime and postwar dismantling of the Iraqi military and security services crippled the state's capacity to control violence and maintain order, creating and absolute*

¹ Bozarslan, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

² Dexter Filkins, "Choices at the top", *The New Yorker*, 30 June 2014, cited by Bozarslan, *op. cit.*, p.154.

dependence on foreign military power. Finally, the war undermined the state legitimacy, producing a high level of political uncertainty and insecurity which led to ethnic and sectarian mobilization and conflict. ¹»

Considering these states as failing, one should not forget the fact that this phenomenon is open to criticisms. Some researchers ask rightly the following question: Failed for whom and how? For Bøås and Jennings “labeling states as ‘failed’ or (not) operates as a means of delineating the range of acceptable policy responses to those states, including the viability of military responses. ²” Flibbert suggests that state failure concept facilitated the intervention of US Defense Department “in environments of state failure and what comes to be called ‘ungoverned territories’, spaces, or areas. ³”

Moreover the anthropomorphism attributed to states via expressions such as state death, failure, collapse and weak /and strong states distinction seems to be problematic. As we consider these features like human features and accept them in their current form, it can obscure the understanding of the phenomenon as an interactional process.

Accepting the fact that different types of political violence allow us to see how relationships or interactions will develop, what form they will take in the framework of “state failure” will, in turn, improve the understanding of the failure as a more complex social phenomenon. A closer examination of different types of intertwined violence and their relationships can emphasize the emergent properties for each failure. This can also enable the more qualitative work on the subject (particularly field work, in-depth interviews with actors on state failure sites) to complement and increase the capacity of quantitative studies.

In addition, this approach would coincide with a multidisciplinary perspective that state failure should be studied not only from the International Relations perspective but also from anthropological, historical, sociological perspectives in order to show the reality of the sufferings. In short, far from being a spectacle that we see on television or a “cold” object of study, failed or failed states affect the lives of real people.

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¹ Flibbert, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

² Morten Bøås and Kathleen M. Jennings, « ‘Failed States’ and ‘State Failure’: Threats or Opportunities? », *Globalizations*, Vol.4, n° 4, 2007, p. 475.

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