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CANADIAN DEFENCE & FOREIGN AFFAIRS INSTITUTE

## **Failed States or Failed Policies? Problem versus Enemies**

by David Carment and Yiagadeesen Samy  
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# Policy Update

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## **Failed States or Failed Policies? Problem versus Enemies**

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**A** lot has been written and said recently in scholarly articles and news outlets about the demise of failed states as a paradigm for shaping and influencing security and development policy. About a year ago, the venerable *Foreign Affairs* magazine published a piece declaring the end of the concept as outdated and no longer useful because the so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT), now over 10 years in the making, was more or less officially dead. Although the idea has been around at least since Bill Clinton was president, it was the GWOT that launched state failure onto centre stage.

The justification for failed states policies was provided by no less than the World Bank, among others, who argued that such states were the crucible for terrorist activities and vectors for the transmission and diffusion of transnational conflict, crime and environmental instability. More recently, Doug Saunders, writing in the *Globe and Mail* and using Uganda as an example, noted that our aid is being wasted on fragile states. And just this year, the decade-old Fund for Peace announced that it was going to change its Failed States Index to the Fragile States Index. While this change is meant to recognize that all states are fragile in a relative sense (an argument which we have made for many years), it is probably equally the result of all the negative attention that the term 'failed states' has received over the years.

Today Ukraine and Syria are locked in civil war, Iraq is no longer a functional state, Afghanistan is backsliding, Haiti remains in a state of paralysis, Pakistan stands vulnerable to violence and collapse, and several countries in Africa such as South Sudan, the Central African Republic and Libya are all facing imminent collapse. The latter conflicts are spreading to neighbouring countries and could destabilize entire regions. Surely the paradigm still resonates.

To be sure, state failure has long been decried as a narrow and Western-centric concept that is not adaptable to local situations. As pointed out by Lant Pritchett, Michael Woolcock and Matt Andrews, some countries exhibit "isomorphic mimicry" by simply maintaining the appearance of being engaged with developmental discourses, thus gaming the system, in order to attract donor support. Pakistan and Afghanistan are cases in point. While Pakistan has recently been dropped from Canada's list of focus countries, it still remains classified as a "development partner"; Afghanistan remains a country of focus for Canada's aid program. Still the pendulum does indeed appear to have swung the other way.

For their part, Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs John Baird and British Foreign Secretary William Hague believing, perhaps, that the failed states paradigm doesn't have much political footing, announced earlier this year that Canada and the UK would invest in stopping animal poaching in Africa as a way of addressing that continent's deep seated economic and political turmoil. Considering that Africa must create five million new jobs in the coming decade in order to address its demographic youth bulge and economic imbalances, Mr Baird's and Mr Hague's policy comes across as a quaint, if not superficial, response that is unlikely to have a significant impact on instability. Contrast that with Tony Blair's and Paul Martin's deep personal and intellectual investment in the problem; both individuals produced sweeping policy documents to fix failed states that were not picked up by their successors.

The rejection of the failed states paradigm by today's Western governments comes as no surprise to us. As researchers who have been actively engaged in research on failed and fragile states for over a decade, we have witnessed a dramatic decline in meaningful failed states activities, analysis and policies. And those investments that have been made are not being properly realised. Save for Prime Minister Stephen Harper's global health initiative (which will



see an additional 3.5 billion dollars invested in maternal and infant health programming from 2015 to 2020) which appears spurred on mostly by Bill Gates moving in lock step with the UK's Department for International Development (DfID), the current Canadian government has not got much to show for its efforts.

It is hard to make a case for positive change in either Afghanistan or Haiti, the two biggest recipients of Canadian aid dollars in the past decade. Canada's aid program in Afghanistan has been described as "a sad story of wasted taxpayer money, and unfulfilled promises"<sup>1</sup> while lack of progress in Haiti since the devastating earthquake more than four years ago has been a continuous source of frustration for donors, including Canada.

One might call failed states "problems from hell" or "wicked problems" - those that defy simple easy solutions. Wicked problems require a high degree of international coordination, political capital, and shared knowledge, to solve. They are immensely complex with multiple levels of consultation, coalitions and blocs standing in opposition to one another. They require diplomacy, skill and knowledge. Use of force is not really a long-term option.

Like state failure, climate change is a "wicked problem" in which the role of knowledge itself is contested at the highest levels. Some have suggested we can address wicked problems, but we have a tough time eradicating them. In 2008, John Camillus wrote in the [Harvard Business Review](#) that wicked problems: "occur in a social context; the greater the disagreement among stakeholders, the more wicked the problem. It's the social complexity of wicked problems as much as their technical difficulties that make them tough to manage." Wicked problems are also public policy issues in which the benefits are contested, the claims about causal effects are debated and the impacts are uncertain.

So what exactly - if anything – does Canada have in place of a failed states policy? With Stephen Harper, what we have witnessed is a shift away from understanding foreign policy making as a response to complex, nested and interrelated issues and problems that require deep analysis, strategic planning and long term investment to something simpler and more easily consumed domestically.

From the current government's perspective, the new reality is straightforward and simple. Stephen Harper is not a problem solver. By his own admission, he eschews root causes and chastises those who might put them front and centre. In a speech Harper gave during a recent visit to Israel, the Prime Minister admitted he had no interest in helping to resolve the conflict in Syria. A solution to that conflict did not appear possible, so there wasn't much point in trying.

Clearly, the distinction between global threats, problems and enemies is not lost on Canada's government. It is perhaps politically more profitable to focus on enemies than it is threats and global problems. Consider that a world that separates enemies from friends is amenable to simple (and simplistic) policy options; and it allows policy makers to lay the world's problems at the feet of their so called "enemies". Problems with Ukraine's political stability, economic growth and corruption? Blame Vladimir Putin for all that. Resurgent troubles in the Middle East and North Africa? Blame Syria, Iran and Radical Islam. Instability in Latin America? Hold Venezuela accountable. Arctic sovereignty at risk? Blame Russia again. Africa's states at risk? Focus on poachers.

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<sup>1</sup> National Post 2012. "A foreign aid insider explains Canada's \$1.5 billion Afghan Sinkhole." (October 13).



Perhaps the most egregious manipulation of the blame game comes from those Western pundits and policy makers who see the world as an emerging Manichean dualism reminiscent of World War I, where the world is divided between those that want to “revise” the rules of global politics like Russia, China and Iran, and the “virtuous” circle of democratic and peaceful NATO allies who are only interested in maintaining system-wide stability. It is folly to think of the world in such terms for it sets us on a path of confrontation and international gridlock as is the case currently in Ukraine.

Unfortunately, falling through these cracks created by this manufactured global fissure are a lot of the world’s global problems. These problems risk being neglected, perhaps deliberately so. Avoidance is one way of absolving governments of responsibility to do something of relevance and importance on the international scene.

Playing the “enemy” game may be fine for political purposes but the world needs problem solvers and global leadership. The world is full of looming threats and problems including state failure - that require full and collective engagement. Climate change is real, global inequality is real, failed states are real and they affect us today as well as future generations. Failed states are the problems from hell that politicians are desperate to ignore lest they show how utterly unprepared they really are to think these things through.

## ► About the Authors

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**David Carment** is a full Professor of International Affairs at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University and Fellow of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI). He is also a NATO Fellow and listed in Who's Who in International Affairs. In addition Professor Carment serves as the principal investigator for the Country Indicators for Foreign Policy project (CIFP).

Professor Carment has served as Director of the Centre for Security and Defence Studies at Carleton University and is the recipient of a Carleton Graduate Student's teaching excellence award, SSHRC fellowships and research awards, Carleton University's research achievement award, and a Petro-Canada Young Innovator Award. Professor Carment has held fellowships at the Kennedy School, Harvard and the Hoover Institution, Stanford. and currently heads a team of researchers that evaluates policy effectiveness in failed and fragile states (see Country Indicators for Foreign Policy). Recent publications on these topics appear in the Harvard International Review and the Journal of Conflict Management and Peace Science.

**Yiagadeesen Samy** teaches courses in economic development, international assistance and quantitative methods. His broad research interests are in the areas of international trade and development economics. More specifically, he has worked on trade and labor standards; debt relief; and aid allocation and aid effectiveness in fragile states. Some of his current work is examining the role of emerging donors; the allocation of aid for trade; and the relationship between taxation and development.



## ► **Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute**

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CDFAI was created to address the ongoing discrepancy between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically, Canadians tend to think of foreign policy – if they think of it at all – as a matter of trade and markets. They are unaware of the importance of Canada engaging diplomatically, militarily, and with international aid in the ongoing struggle to maintain a world that is friendly to the free flow of goods, services, people and ideas across borders and the spread of human rights. They are largely unaware of the connection between a prosperous and free Canada and a world of globalization and liberal internationalism.

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