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Fragile states

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Introduction

The broad landscape of fragile states has not changed significantly over the past few years. Most of the developments and trends discussed in the previous Strategic Monitor have continued into 2012. The past year was marked by unrest in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia as well as difficult transition processes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). International policy towards fragile states was primarily focused on situations where the failure of states translated into armed violence, organised crime, radicalisation, illegal migration, and humanitarian crises. This is occurring against the background of a changing international playing field in which the influence of Western donors in these states is gradually decreasing (Hemmer & Van Beijnum 2012).

Two trends that are expected to assert themselves in the next five to ten years are the rise of radical Islamic groups in Africa and the changing division of labour in addressing problems in fragile regions, with Western actors trying to control security risks remotely and together with local players. The first trend could have implications for global security and stability: the political commitment to reduce the terrorist threat in Africa is therefore likely to intensify.

Meanwhile, and not for the first time, the idea of ‘fragility’ is under fire. Events such as the upheavals in the MENA region and the crisis in Mali are sowing doubts about the usefulness of this concept in predicting and addressing contemporary forms of instability and violent conflict and their transnational effects (see Box 1).

1 Significant changes in the past year

Given the structural and persistent nature of their problems, it is not surprising that the regions that were considered very fragile in 2011 also received negative attention in 2012.

The Horn of Africa has been plagued by the ongoing conflict between the two Sudans, especially at the border between the two countries. The shutdown of oil production—which is the mainstay that drives both economies—also aggravated the political and social unrest in both countries. Somalia in turn brought an end to a lengthy transition period with the appointment of a new president and government and the reform of its parliament. It is uncertain whether this is really a new chapter for the troubled country. The central question is whether the successes that have been achieved mainly by military means over the past year, such as the stabilisation of Mogadishu, the rolling back of the influence of terrorist group al-Shabaab, and the curbing of piracy, can be consolidated—and if so, how. In Ethiopia, the unexpected death of Meles Zenawi, the prime minister since 1991, has suddenly put the relative stability of this regional power under pressure. To date, however, the uncertainty following Zenawi’s death has had no tangible repercussions. And in the run-up to elections in Kenya in March 2013, hostility



A US soldier greets a boy in Bamako, Mali. After the coup in March/April 2012, France launched an intervention in the country under a UN mandate in January 2013.

Photo: The US Army

between different tribes has increased, while Kenya's contribution to the armed struggle against al-Shabaab is rendering the country vulnerable to attacks.

In the Great Lakes Region, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was afflicted by a proliferation and increased activity of armed movements in 2012. After allegations that neighbouring Rwanda was supporting the main rebel group in the east of the DRC—known as 'M-23'—some donors decided to suspend aid to Rwanda. In West Africa, Mali was rocked by a coup in March 2012. Exploiting the ensuing chaos, radical Islamic movements grasped power in the north of the country. In the space of just a few weeks, Mali was transformed from a perceived paragon of good and stable governance into a global headache. Elsewhere in the region, sectarian, religious-inspired violence in Nigeria—including targeted attacks on churches, mosques, and government buildings—took the lives of hundreds of people.

The fragility of the political constellations in Iraq, Pakistan, and especially Afghanistan were undiminished in 2012. The concern is that Afghanistan will fall back into the

Box 1 'Fragility': A fickle idea

The unexpected uprisings in the MENA region, including the collapse of Syria—an unfree country but hitherto considered relatively stable—and the free fall of 'model country' Mali, have sparked the discussion about the concept of 'fragility' and its applications (see, for example, Beehner & Young 2012; Kaplan 2012; Leigh 2012). Some recurring observations in this discussion are that an agreement on what exactly fragility entails is lacking—witness also the proliferation of definitions—and that the tendency to label all countries that go through a period of instability as 'fragile' persists. The result is that fragility is threatening to become a catch-all term that lacks policy relevance and could even encourage a standard approach in countries that require a specific approach.

As a result of the symptom-driven assigning of this label, its predictive value has become worthless—a criticism that also holds for the Failed States Index, an annual ranking of 'failed' states. Some fragile states are also opposed to the way in which they are identified. They point to the stigmas and apparent arbitrariness that underlie this categorisation.

In short, resistance against the careless handling of the concept of 'fragility' is growing. Even the version of the standard definition previously used in the 2012 Strategic Monitor—i.e. states that are unable or unwilling to fulfil essential governmental functions and to provide certain basic services to their populations—is open to interpretation. It is therefore high time that we impose order on this conceptual chaos and take a critical look at the future use of the label 'fragility' and its policy implications.

grip of the Taliban following the planned 2014 withdrawal of international forces and disintegrate into a civil war.

In the past year, however, all eyes were focused on the transitions in the MENA region—transitions that in general proceeded with much difficulty. The new leaders of Tunisia and Egypt are only at the beginning of their attempts to recover the impaired trust between the government and citizens. The situation in Libya remained as unpredictable as it was explosive: the violent power struggle that erupted after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi is still undecided. In Syria, the international community is divided and seemingly powerless to prevent the popular uprising, which began in 2011, from slowly degenerating into a bloody civil war whose effects are being felt regionally. Although the position of President Bashar al-Assad is under pressure, various initiatives to find—or to force—a way out of the crisis have so far failed to bear results.

The rise identified in the 2012 Strategic Monitor of non-traditional actors in fragile states such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (the BRICS), Turkey, and the Gulf States has also continued in 2012. The business-like approach of these non-traditional actors is welcomed by many politicians and businessmen in fragile states, but they also face the criticism that their way of operating aggravates the disparity between rich and poor in these countries. Struggling with economic and financial problems closer

to home, many traditional Western donors have been marking time. In setting policy priorities, they are now much more keen to protect their own interests. This manifests itself mostly in lean development agendas with particular attention to opportunities for their own private sector and to regions that pose transnational security threats.

Scenario framework

Compared with the scenario framework in the previous edition of the Monitor, there is continuity. The interests and involvement of the BRICS and other non-traditional actors in fragile states are increasing, while the role of Western, traditional actors in these states is declining. This trend is part of a more general evolution towards multipolarity, although fragile states remain within the multilateral quadrant, just like last year.

2 The next five to ten years: Probabilities and uncertainties

Probabilities

- The MENA region, the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes region, and Afghanistan will be sources of instability and insecurity in the future.
- The decreasing preparedness and capacity of Western actors to be physically present in fragile states and/or regions. This is increasingly left to regional partners, with Western actors resorting to technological support and aid from a distance.

Uncertainties

- The future of fragile states remains uncertain due to their instability.
- The apparent rise of radical Islamic groups in parts of Africa, which creates the risk of sanctuaries emerging for extremist organisations in Africa.

As noted in the 2012 Strategic Monitor, the future in fragile states and regions is difficult to predict. However, it is likely that the areas that are currently the largest source of instability and insecurity internationally, including parts of the MENA region, the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes region, and Afghanistan, will continue to be so in the next five to ten years. The abrupt emergence of new crisis zones, however, cannot be ruled out, as the recent developments in Syria and Mali demonstrate.

Moreover, two striking trends emerged over the past year that are worth discussing. The first is the apparent advance of radical Islamic groups in parts of Africa. The fall of the regime in Libya and the related influx of weapons and recruits have expanded the capacity of such groups in the region. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and related movements have a strong presence in northern Mali and a scope that covers Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, and Niger. In Nigeria, Boko Haram is fighting for

the introduction of sharia law nationwide and is moreover sowing terror among the civilian population. Although it has suffered some serious blows on the battlefield in 2012, the Al-Qaeda-linked al-Shabaab is still a significant player in much of Somalia. Neighbouring Yemen also houses an active branch of Al-Qaeda.

The fear is that Africa, and the Sahel in particular, will become a sanctuary for these and other extremist organisations, and that forms of cooperation may arise between them (Karin Leigh 2011). It has thus become more likely that the policy focus on and commitment in this region will further increase in the next five to ten years, with Mali appearing to emerge as the main battleground in the short term. A relevant observation is that several of the jihadist 'newcomers' who populate the region seem to be executing primarily a domestic agenda, contrary to what their rhetoric sometimes suggests (see, for example, Worth 2012).

A second trend is the new division of labour that seems to have arisen in the way the problems of fragile regions are addressed, especially when it concerns security issues. The willingness and capacity of Western traditional actors to be physically present in these regions is diminishing. Instead, they seek refuge in a resort to technological tools and undertake cooperation with regional partners. Leaders of terrorist movements in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia are eliminated by drones. In Somalia, it is the troops of the African Union (AU) that protect the capital and hunt for al-Shabaab. To restore order in Mali and to win back control of the north of the country, the organisation of West African states (ECOWAS) is preparing a military intervention, thereby encouraged by their Western allies. And the hunt for the notorious Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Central Africa is being conducted by a coalition of countries from the region itself with the support of the United States. This trend, in which Western actors try to represent their security interests from a distance and via local 'intermediaries', is likely to continue in the next five to ten years.

This development is an illustration of the change in global relationships, with fragile states making increasingly louder claims to their place in the world, sometimes in cooperation with each other. International agreements such as those laid down in December 2011 in the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States—agreements that provide guidance on how engagement with such vulnerable areas should proceed—attribute a stronger, more guiding role to governments of fragile states (IDPS 2012). As a result of this professionalisation of relations, the traditional relationship between provider and recipient of aid, in which Western donors often determine the conditions, is slowly but surely coming under pressure.

Scenario framework

The rise of extremist organisations in parts of Africa has resulted in the category of fragile states moving slightly towards the fragmentation quadrant. The observed increase in ad hoc and non-institutionalised collaboration indicates shifting global relations and a multipolar tendency. This development fits into a scenario characterised by increasing fragmentation.

3 Strategic shocks

Strategic shocks

- Islamic radicals seize power in the Middle East or South Asia.
- Genocide.
- Implosion of central authority in Pakistan.
- Radical Islamic organisations seize power in parts of Africa.

Strategic shocks from the Future Policy Survey and the 2012 Strategic Monitor:

Islamic radicals seize power in the Middle East or South Asia. How the transitions in the MENA region will proceed remains highly uncertain, and the likelihood that extremists will try to take control of the government somewhere in the region remains real.

Genocide. Developments in the past year have led us to the conclusion that parts of the MENA region, the Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes region are at the greatest risk of large-scale crimes against humanity and genocide.

Implosion of central authority in Pakistan. The collapse of nuclear-armed Pakistan is a pessimistic but still conceivable scenario.

An additional potential shock is:

Radical Islamic organisations seize power in parts of Africa. The intransigence of al-Shabaab in Somalia, the territorial gains of AQIM in Mali and its surroundings, and the destabilising effect of Boko Haram in Nigeria unambiguously demonstrate that Africa is particularly vulnerable to forms of violent extremism and an interesting area for jihadist groups.

4 Winners and losers

The 2012 Strategic Monitor noted that ‘the involvement of the BRICS and other non-traditional actors in fragile states is aimed primarily at the conclusion of mutually beneficial transactions with central governments’. A possible consequence is that this ‘ratifies or even strengthens [...] the imbalanced relationships’ in countries where power and wealth are already highly concentrated among the administrative and business elites (Hemmer & Van Beijnum 2012: 111-112). In this scenario, the parties involved in these transactions are the winners and those parts of the population that do not benefit from the economic growth of their countries are the losers. This conclusion of the 2012 Monitor still applies. After decades of mainly ‘aid-oriented’ investments, Western actors currently

seem to be playing a supporting role at a time when the commercial opportunities in fragile regions seem to be increasing.

5 Implications for global security and stability

Radical Islamic groups seem to be on the rise in Africa. It is feared that this development will negatively affect global security and stability. For the time being, it is mainly the regions where these extremists are active that are experiencing the effects. Given the generally limited capability of these groups and the domestic agenda that the majority of them seem to have, there appears to be little danger for the outside world. However, this does mean that Western targets run a higher risk in these regions and that the fear of terrorist attacks and spillover effects could spur many Western countries to try and curb these threats.

6 Implications for global security and stability

Europe is expected to be involved in international efforts to bring a halt to radical Islamic groups in Africa. It is likely that these efforts will take shape primarily in a multilateral context and will be aimed at delivering relatively small, specialist contributions to peacekeeping operations and other missions that will strive to promote security and the rule of law in the relevant fragile regions. Furthermore, Europe will probably continue to be involved in the near future in activities aimed at combating organised crime, illegal migration, humanitarian crises, and other transnational effects of fragility.

Conclusion

Whether out of fear of negative spillover effects, out of an interest in new growth markets, or out of a desire to fight poverty and defend human rights, Western countries will continue to monitor and try to influence developments in fragile states and regions—regardless of the precise label these states will receive in the future. In giving shape to their commitment, however, they must take into account the fact that the rules of the game are currently being rewritten and that governments of fragile states will probably increasingly determine on their own the conditions governing the commitment.