

# The Dangers of Failing Middle East States

by Kobi Michael and Yoel Guzansky

In an address to a prominent British think tank, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu recently argued that before establishing a Palestinian state, it would be necessary to internalize what had happened in the broader Middle East during the past few years—a reference to the collapsing regional order and the attendant proliferation of failed states. “It’s time,” he said, “we reassessed whether the modern



*Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, speaking at Chatham House, London, November 2017, voiced concern over the long-term consequences of the Arab upheavals. Some analysts see the rise of failed states in the Middle East as a possible consequence of the upheavals. Such states may be fertile soil for extremist and terror groups.*

model we have of sovereignty, and unfettered sovereignty, is applicable everywhere in the world.”<sup>1</sup>

Netanyahu expressed a wider and deepening concern over the long-term consequences of the ongoing Arab upheavals, euphorically misdiagnosed at their onset as the “Arab Spring.” These upheavals have toppled a number of established regimes and destabilized several states at a horrific human and material cost. But they also have called into question the century-long Arab system based on territorial nation-states by

accelerating processes and undercurrents that have long been in operation, turning many of these entities into failed states. By most accepted measures, the Palestinian Authority is also a failed entity. Would a Palestinian state fare any better?

<sup>1</sup> [“Netanyahu in London: Palestinian sovereignty may not work,”](#) *Middle East Monitor: Memo*, Nov. 3, 2017; [“Israel’s Foreign Policy Priorities,”](#) interview with Robin Niblett, Chatham House, London, Nov. 3, 2017.

## The Failed State Phenomenon

According to the U.N.'s definition, "failed states" are political entities that demonstrate little or no ability to provide their citizens with basic security.<sup>2</sup> Such states suffer from at least three key failings: a weak government that lacks legitimacy and does not enjoy a monopoly on the means of violence; extreme political and societal fragmentation; and severe economic weakness. To these can be added the lack of correlation between nation and state, especially when various national or ethnic groups aspire to independence or view themselves as belonging to a neighboring state.<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon is particularly salient in the contemporary Middle East where the post-World War I agreements partitioned the defunct Ottoman Empire into artificial states that grouped together diverse ethnic groups, rival religions, and, in some cases, speakers of different languages.

American political scientist William Zartman argues that, in most cases, the process of state failure is gradual and prolonged, rather than sudden, as in a coup d'état or revolt. He notes that states that suffer from internal disintegration (primarily because of identity politics—religious, ethnic, etc.) and simultaneously are characterized by weak or non-functioning institutions are liable to become failed states. In such states, failure intensifies in a kind of vicious circle. The weakness of the state's institutions reinforces the fragmentation, which in turn further weakens the institutions

**Most of today's active conflicts, including international terrorism, emanate from failed states.**

and their legitimacy.<sup>4</sup>

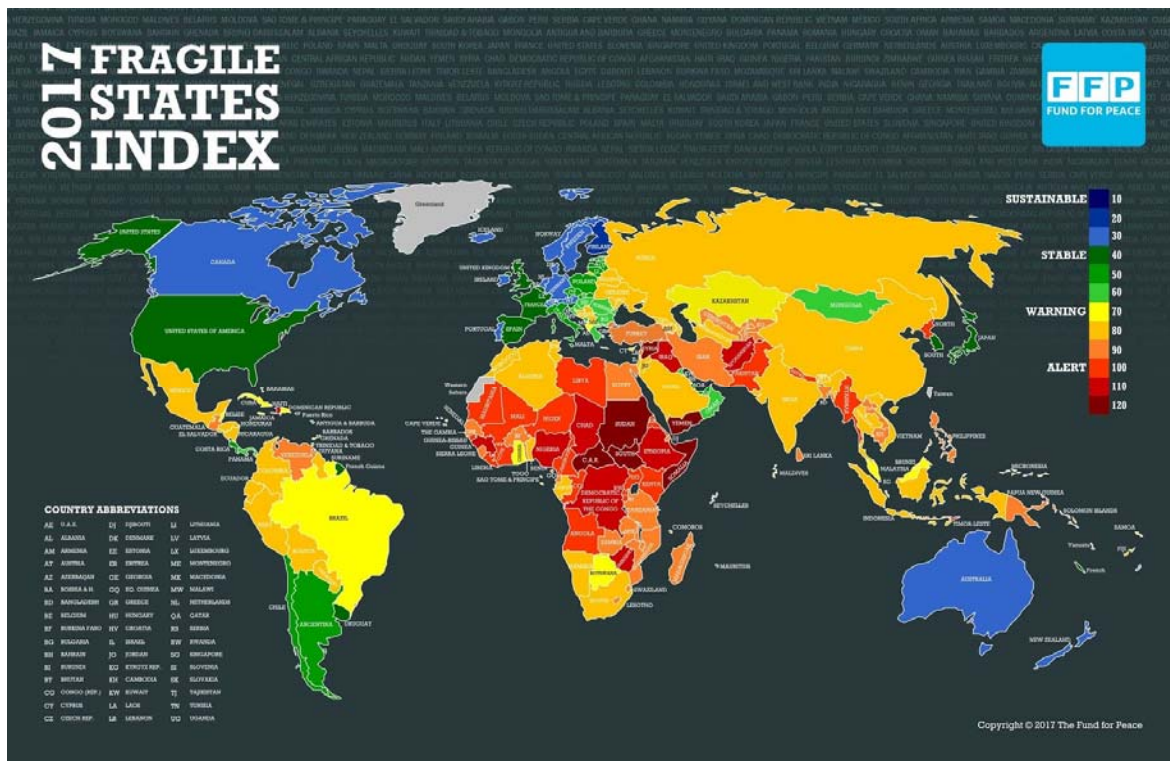
The last two decades show that most of today's active conflicts, including international terrorism, emanate from failed states, which either cannot control the spillover of domestic turmoil beyond their borders or deliberately seek to export it in an attempt to reduce the threat at home. In other words, crises that develop in failed states also harm their surroundings: They are the biggest generators of humanitarian crises, displaced people, and refugees; they endanger regime stability in neighboring states; they enable access to sophisticated weapons stolen from collapsing military facilities, and they constitute fertile soil for the advent of extremist and terror groups. In the context of the Middle East, they encourage subversive activities among Muslim communities in Western countries in a way that might destabilize those countries' social order.

These effects are having a global impact, not least since the international community has a limited ability to intervene in failed states, to suppress the violent rebel forces that operate in them, or to support the stabilization of nation-states and the regional system. These limits are the product of a lack of political will needed to intervene in areas of conflict; the inherent conceptual and operational weakness of peacekeeping and state-building missions; and the understanding that there is a limited lifespan for intervention in these areas, based on the mostly negative experience with such past missions. To these should be added the problems resulting from competition among

<sup>2</sup> ["Resolution 60/1 adopted by the General Assembly: 2005 World Summit Outcome,"](#) U.N. General Assembly, New York, Oct. 24, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Miller, "When and How Regions Become Peaceful: Potential Theoretical Pathways to Peace," *The International Studies Review*, June 2005.

<sup>4</sup> I. William Zartman, *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995), pp. 1-11.



According to The Fund for Peace indices of failed states, most of the states in the worst stage of failure are Muslim-majority and located in sub-Saharan Africa.

aid organizations and difficulty in coordinating among missions operating simultaneously in regions of conflict. These obstacles reduce even further the chances of success and might even exacerbate the situation.<sup>5</sup> Small wonder that successive U.S. administrations have identified the problem of failed states as a growing security threat to the national interest.<sup>6</sup>

5 Jennifer G. Cooke and Richard Downie, “[Rethinking Engagement in Fragile States](#),” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., July 23, 2015; Linda Pullman, *The Crisis Caravan: What’s Wrong with Humanitarian Aid?* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010).

6 See, for example, “[The National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#),” The White House, Washington, D.C., Sept. 2002, p. 1; “[Remarks of President Barack Obama—State of the Union Address As Delivered](#),” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Washington, D.C., Jan. 13, 2016.

## The Failed Arab State

According to The Fund for Peace indices of failed states, thirty-three are defined as “fragile” or “in an advanced process of collapse.” Most of the states in the worst stage of failure are Muslim-majority and located in sub-Saharan Africa. The same index for 2015 included even more Arab states at higher levels of state failure. In the 2016 index, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq were at the highest levels ever.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the most recent U.N. *Arab Human Development Report* (AHDR), published in November 2016, identified the Arab world as the region that has experienced the most rapid increase in war and violent conflict over the past decade and determined that the Middle East now encompasses “the largest number of

7 [Fragile States Index](#), The Fund for Peace, Washington, D.C., 2016.

countries that have become failed states.” The report predicts that almost three out of four Arabs will live in “countries with high risk of conflict” by 2020.<sup>8</sup>

**For most Arab nation-states, their governability and stability were reliant on the iron hand with which they were ruled.**

The roots of this stark state of affairs can be traced back to the post-World War I creation of the Arab territorial nation-state system, which consisted of artificial entities with weak self-identities, territories that were often poorly suited to their populations because of diverse or rival ethnic groups, religions, and languages, and regimes that lacked legitimacy. Most Arab states failed to shape a solid and agreed-upon national ethos during their years of existence, and their governability and relative stability were exclusively reliant on the iron hand with which they were ruled. Occasional attempts to achieve legitimacy via sociopolitical ideologies, such as Baathist pan-Arabism or Nasserite socialism, plus fabricated historical narratives—Iraqis as descendants of the Babylonians; Palestinians as descendants of the Canaanites—were to little avail. The deep religious, ethnic, and national schisms plaguing local societies continued to fester and would have probably continued to do so for decades more had it not been for a unique convergence of developments including rapid globalization, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the advent of jihadist groups, and deepening economic conditions in the Arab states, which combined to unleash the Arab upheavals. These in turn accelerated the failing process of the Arab nation-state system to the extent of undermining its underlying nation-state basis.

Several of these states—Yemen, Libya, and to some extent, Syria, as well as the Palestinian Authority-ruled West Bank and the Hamas-ruled Gaza

Strip—no longer exist as coherent states with central governments capable of enforcing authority on most of their territory, having instead become arenas of violent and bloody conflict. The weakness of their central governments and loss of control over organized violence have led to the expansion of ungoverned peripheries. These regions have become incubators for terrorist organizations and non-state actors and serve as their “launch sites” into the rest of the region. They accomplish this expansion by establishing territory-based continuums or by creating a network structure without such a continuum. The self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS), for example, created a combination of territorial continuum, such as in Syria and Iraq, and network expansion in the Sinai Peninsula and Libya by means of organizations such as Ansar Bait al-Maqdis in Sinai (Wilayat Sina), which has sworn allegiance to ISIS and its leader. During its existence, ISIS developed and broadened its network to all continents, and today, after its territorial demise, it is still able to operate its network and to inspire many individuals to terrorism wherever they are.

### **Hybrid Non-state Actors**

New entities have arisen on the ruins of the failed Middle Eastern states. While they are more than organizations, they are not states and can, therefore, be referred to as hybrid non-state actors.<sup>9</sup> These entities

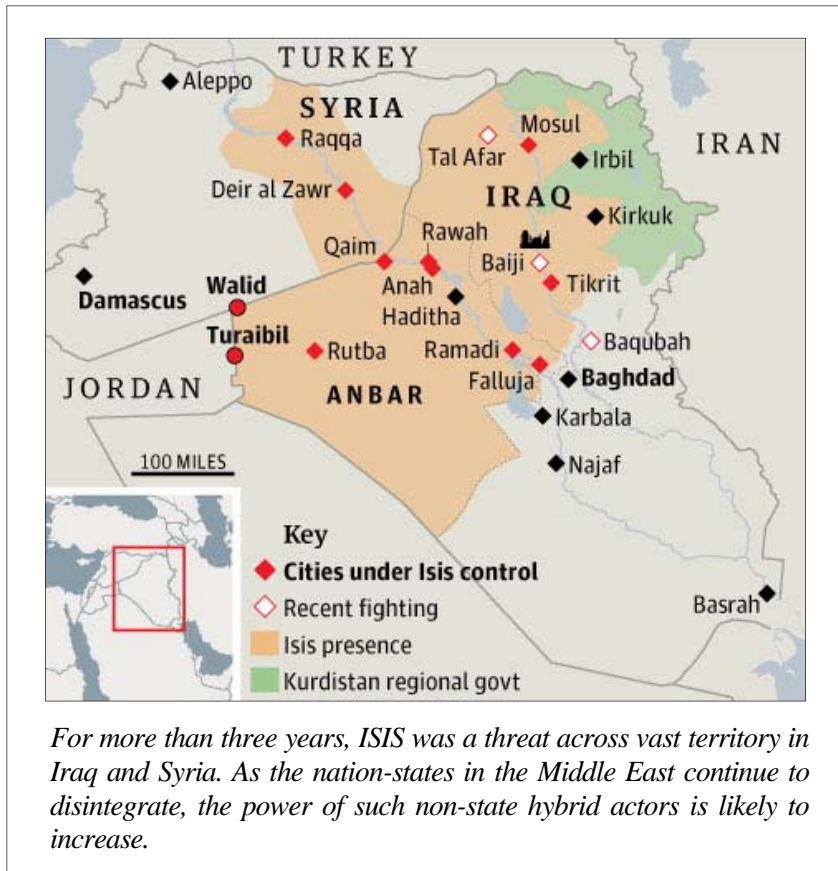
<sup>8</sup> [\*Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality\*](#), United Nations Development Programme, New York, 2016, p. 175.

<sup>9</sup> Carmit Valensi, “[Non-state Actors](#): Theoretical Limitations in View of the Changing Reality in the Middle East,” *Military and Strategic Affairs*, Mar. 2015.

develop supranational identities and operate in the name of a universal ideology. They reject the Arab nation-state model and do not recognize borders, thus undermining regional and global stability. Their political goal is to create an Islamic caliphate in the entire region and, at a later stage, beyond it. They use violence extensively to intimidate opponents and also make efficient use of social networks.

Their universal ideology notwithstanding, these are territory-based organizations at this stage. For more than three years, ISIS controlled vast territory in Iraq and Syria, which it envisaged as part of an ever expanding caliphate rather than an ordinary nation-state. The Islamic State was effectively a failed state similar to the Arab states it sought to subvert, which suffered from the same endemic flaws that brought about ISIS's eventual demise. Likewise, for all their expansionist, Islamist ideology, the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Yemenite Houthis, which effectively dominate their respective states, have stopped short of challenging these states' legitimacy. They have, nevertheless, striven to reshape the regional order: Hezbollah through its heavy involvement in the Syrian civil war; the Houthis by fighting the Saudis. And they did it at the behest of a resurgent Iran, which, though a territorial nation-state for much longer than the Arab states, has rejected the international order based on the territorial nation-state since its 1979 transformation into the Islamic Republic. In the words of the Islamic Republic's founding father, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini:

The Iranian revolution is not exclusively that of Iran, because



Islam does not belong to any particular people ... We will export our revolution throughout the world because it is an Islamic revolution. The struggle will continue until the calls "there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah" are echoed all over the world.<sup>10</sup>

The same applies to Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which subordinates its aim of creating a Palestinian state on Israel's ruins to the wider goal of establishing the caliphate, in line with the outlook of its Egyptian parent

<sup>10</sup> Efraim Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism: A History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 217.

organization. In the words of senior Hamas leader Mahmoud al-Zahar:

Islamic and traditional views reject the notion of establishing an independent Palestinian state ... In the past, there was no independent Palestinian state .... [Hence] our main goal is to establish a great Islamic state, be it pan-Arabic or pan-Islamic.<sup>11</sup>

As the movement's slogan puts it: "Allah is [Hamas's] goal, the Prophet its model, the Qur'an its Constitution, Jihad its path, and death for the case of Allah its most sublime belief."<sup>12</sup>

As the nation-states in the Middle East continue to disintegrate, the power of such non-state hybrid actors is likely to increase, not least since the Arab upheavals have demonstrated that the most serious threats to the territorial nation-state system are internal, not external. It has been mainly domestic opponents who have resisted both the longtime ruling dictatorships and the new regimes that have tried to establish their legitimacy. This was the case in Syria, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, the Palestinian Authority, and, to some extent, Egypt.

The likelihood that new regimes will manage to establish themselves despite their many opponents continues to be influenced by several factors: national unity with a lower level of fragmentation and a sense of a shared ethos; the political and functional stability and efficiency of state institutions; the state's economic resources, and its military power. The combination of all these factors determines how new regimes consolidate their rule. Sadly, so far,

this combination of factors has led to greater violence and the intensification of intrastate conflicts. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that there will not be any rapid improvement in the situation of the weak and failed states in the Middle East and North Africa. Furthermore, one can predict that, in the short and medium term, instability will spread to more states and will deepen in states that are already unstable.<sup>13</sup> This trend does not augur well for the region's security and might negatively affect the international order.

### **The Failed Palestinian Authority**

Against this backdrop, Netanyahu's concerns about the viability of a prospective Palestinian state seem quite reasonable. During its twenty-three years of existence, the Palestinian Authority (PA)—dominated by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)—has been a semi-state, which, since January 1996, has maintained control over some 95 percent of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In that time, the PA has failed abysmally to establish stable and functional state structures despite the vast resources committed to this end by the international community.

By most common parameters, the PA is a failed entity, beginning with its total lack of control over the means of violence within its territory. Yasser Arafat, who headed the PA from its establishment in May 1994 to his death in November 2004, chose not to disarm the terror groups operating under the PA's jurisdiction as required by the Oslo accords, including his own PLO organization. Instead, he allowed the existence of armed groups in the PA territories in order to use them against

---

<sup>11</sup> "Exclusive Interview with Hamas Leader," *The Media Line*, Sept. 22, 2005; Walid Mahmoud Abdelnasser, *The Islamic Movement in Egypt: Perceptions of International Relations, 1967-81* (London: Kegan Paul, 1994), p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism*, pp. 213-4.

---

<sup>13</sup> Yoel Guzansky and Benedetta Berti, "[The Arab Awakening 'Cascade' of Failing States: Dealing with Post-Revolutionary Stabilization Challenges](#)," *Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy*, Apr. 12, 2013.

Israel while distancing the responsibility from the PA. His successor, Mahmoud Abbas, despite some efforts to implement his vision of “one rule, one law, one gun,” did not succeed in changing this stark reality significantly.

Nor did Arafat or Abbas use the massive international aid—the largest per capita in the world—for the construction of public institutions and infrastructure, let alone for the development of a civil society and participatory political processes required for the creation of a viable, functioning, and democratic Palestinian state. Instead, they established a corrupt and repressive entity in the worst tradition of Arab dic-

tatorships, rife with corruption, nepotism, and cronyism, which rapidly lost its public legitimacy.<sup>14</sup> According to a recent survey by Palestinian pollster Khalil Shikaky, most Palestinians have come to consider the PA “a burden on the Palestinian people”; 79 percent of respondents viewed it as corrupt to the extent of demanding its dissolution; 65 percent of the public wanted Abbas to resign.<sup>15</sup>

To make matters worth, Arafat’s encouragement of the growing militarization of the West Bank and Gaza backfired in grand style by enabling Hamas to eclipse the PLO as the dominant political and military



*Masked Palestinian security forces during a raid in Balata refugee camp, West Bank. Yasser Arafat, who headed the PA from 1994 to 2004, allowed the existence of armed groups in the PA territories in order to use them against Israel. His successor, Mahmoud Abbas, has not changed this stark reality.*

power in the territories. In January 2006, the Islamist group won a landslide victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections, and in June 2007, it expelled the PLO from Gaza and took control of the strip with the PA “hovering between survival and collapse—display[ing] many of the traits of a failed state.”<sup>16</sup>

The split between the West Bank and Gaza generated a rupture in Palestinian society by creating not only two disparate geographic, political, economic, and cultural units but rival entities as well, locked in a zero-sum game for intra-Palestinian hegemony. This endemic rivalry has been

<sup>14</sup> Kobi Michael, “The Palestinian Authority: The dangerous transition from failing entity to failing state,” *Israel Affairs*, Feb. 2017, pp. 385-410.

<sup>15</sup> Palestinian Opinion [Poll #57](#), The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR), Ramallah, Sept. 2015, pp. 2, 4-5.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Eisenstadt, “[The Palestinians](#): Between State Failure and Civil War,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., Policy Focus no. 78, Dec. 2007.

further exacerbated by the broader regional upheavals, with Hamas supported by the Iran-Turkey-Qatar axis and the PA backed by the pragmatic Sunni coalition led by Riyadh and Cairo. This made the October 2017 Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement yet another transient respite in the ongoing fight for hegemony. The conflict is bound to resume, underscoring the perennial dysfunctionality of the Palestinian Authority and, for that matter, of a prospective Palestinian state.

**The October 2017 Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement is likely a transient respite in the ongoing fight for Palestinian hegemony.**

### Conclusion

After seven years of upheavals, the Arab world is immensely changed, with many of its members in an accelerated process of state failure. While it would be premature to write off the Middle Eastern nation-state system, key states including Syria and Iraq as well as Libya and Yemen are unlikely to retain their past structures, primarily because none of them has developed a coherent national identity and all suffer from deep sociopolitical schisms. Each state's only chance of survival is probably either within a loose federation where ethnic and religious minorities and tribes enjoy broad autonomy, or as smaller and more coherent states that conform more closely to their demographic, religious, and sociopolitical components. Iraq, for example, could be divided into three

states—Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish—while Syria could be split into Alawite, Sunni, and Kurdish states.

Returning to Netanyahu's cautionary note, the Arab upheavals

underscore the necessity of a paradigm change if the Palestinian state-building is to come to successful fruition rather than culminate in an all-too-familiar failed state. This requires reconstructing society and state institutions in a bottom-up process that ensures broad legitimacy via free sociopolitical participation, redistribution of governing assets and political power, and, above all, exclusive state control of the means of violence. Whether the current Palestinian leadership can rise to this historic challenge remains to be seen.

**Kobi Michael** is a senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Tel Aviv University, and the author of sixteen books and monographs and more than fifty scholarly articles. **Yoel Guzansky** is a research fellow at INSS, having formerly served on the National Security Council in the Prime Minister's Office. The article draws on their book *The Arab World on the Road to State Failure* (INSS, 2017).

