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ABSTRACT

After a decade of significant military and financial assistance by the international community to create a viable state in Afghanistan, serious questions have been raised about the Afghan state’s viability and whether it remains vulnerable to collapse after the withdrawal of foreign forces. State collapse, however, runs contrary to the Realist theory’s conception of states as unitary actors in international relations. Despite the theory’s primary focus on states and their security, it neglects to provide an explanation of the state type or acknowledge the presence of “failed” states and their impact on international relations. To explore this paradox, this thesis takes a historical look into the emergence of state decay in Afghanistan by using Rotberg’s and Foreign Policy Magazine’s indicators for state failure.

Realism’s focus on the state’s outward behavior largely ignores the state’s origins and composition. While the theory’s emphasis on state centrality may be sufficient in explaining state behavior in homogenous, stable, and developed nations, it’s not adequate in delineating the behavior of fragile states. The formation of a legitimate state presupposes that citizens regard the state to serve as the ultimate political authority. The failure of the Afghan state, however, illustrates that upending a highly delicate balance of power between a weak state and a highly fragmented society can intensify the struggle for social control, lead to conflict and ultimately threaten the integrity of the state. This underscores the argument that not all states are deeply rooted in the social, cultural and political identity of the nation or enjoy the same level of legitimacy, a key ingredient for establishing a viable state. International efforts to mitigate security threats by helping
resurrect failed states are likely to face significant hurdles as long as core issues such as the struggle for social control remain unaddressed. Thus, the Afghan state is likely to remain fragile and embody a system of government that’s based more on kinship and patronage befitting a tribal society rather than a rational-legal system based on the Weberian nation-state model.