



State Fragility and the Role of Sustainable Economic Development in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

People in Afghanistan have witnessed the presence of fear, uncertainty, hopelessness, civil unrest, political upheavals, and prolonged suffering of various ethnic groups for about five decades now due to various levels of state fragility. The unfortunate realities and factual data show that nations in the domain of fragile states for many years and decades are often due to ineffective leadership, mismanagement, endemic corruption, and/or foreign interference.

This paper provides a comprehensive and timely assessment of several warning signs of state fragility that should be reflected upon by all leaders in Afghanistan, along with the importance of sustainable economic development opportunities for all citizens.

Using facts and best practices from other nations regarding political stability and entrepreneurial opportunities, the paper concludes with specific examples of how state fragility can be diagnosed, assessed, and prevented through strategic planning, organizing, leading, and controlling of economic development prospects by public and private sector leaders in Afghanistan.

1. INTRODUCTION

“State fragility” (SF) describes countries that are weak or even deficient in certain core functions that are expected of a genuine government, such as authority, capacity, and legitimacy. Each year, millions of people are directly or indirectly touched by SF throughout the world, and many remain displaced for years and decades (Seyoum and Camargo, 2021). For example, one source of state fragility is weak public institutions, which can easily lead to various forms of corruption and abuse by people in authority positions or powerful personalities and groups (Cavico and Mujtaba, 2011). Of course, there are moral and ethical failures that many Afghans have endured over the past five decades regarding human rights violations by legitimate authorities, since some police officers and government officials of fragile states tend to behave as though they are above the law by wrongfully punishing innocent individuals and even groups of people to gain and retain power (Mujtaba, 2007). Fragile states that are not strategically developed can easily become failed or collapsed states where extremists, warlords, and/or populist personalities become key figures (Zürcher, 2012). As explained by Seyoum, “Populism has a polarizing effect as it pits one group against another, thus incentivizing socioeconomic actors to undermine democratic institutions for partisan political gains,” thereby inflaming ethnic conflicts throughout the country (2024, p. 31).

The paper offers insights from fragile states that have overcome instability through high economic growth and greater equality using inclusionary strategies that engage all diverse groups and stakeholders within a nation. Overall, the paper reflects upon answers to the following questions:

1. What is state fragility?
2. Is Afghanistan a fragile or a failed state? If so, how can they transition out of it?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

State fragility has a direct and consequential impact on home economics in every nation, and policymakers should pay close attention to it to make incremental improvements equitably in the lives of all men and women living in the country (Ahmadzai et al., 2025). So, understanding home economics is crucial for all countries, and studying its variables to better equip men and women of a nation with essential skills to manage limited resources effectively can enhance the quality of life for each family.

2.1. Home Economics

Home economics encompasses various aspects, including nutrition, food management, household budgeting, and resource allocation. In poor countries, where access to resources is scarce, understanding how to optimize resource utilization is vital. By acquiring home economics skills, people can make informed decisions about food choices, meal planning, and budgeting, which ultimately leads to improved nutrition, health, and overall well-being.

Moreover, studying home economics can have a ripple effect on the broader regional community and economy. As individuals develop skills in household management, they can share their knowledge with others, contributing to community development and poverty reduction. Home economics education can also empower women, who are often the primary caregivers and household managers in places like Afghanistan, to take control of their economic lives and make informed decisions about resource allocation. By investing in home economics education, poor countries can build a more resilient and resourceful population, become better equipped to overcome poverty, and improve their quality of life (Mujtaba, 2025a; Seyoum, 2024). While state fragility and home economics may initially appear like unrelated concepts, they are closely connected in several ways:

- State fragility is often characterized by poverty, inequality, and lack of economic opportunities.
- State fragility can lead to food shortages, making it challenging for households to access nutritious food consistently.
- Fragile states often have underdeveloped healthcare systems, making it difficult for households to access medical care when needed.
- State fragility can lead to a lack of access to quality education, making it difficult for households to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for economic empowerment.
- State fragility can lead to social unrest, making it challenging for households to maintain social connections and community relationships.

Overall, state fragility can have far-reaching consequences for home economics, affecting households' ability to manage resources, access necessities, and maintain social connections. Addressing state fragility requires a comprehensive approach that includes

understanding its critical causes in each nation, economic development, social protection, and community empowerment.

2.2. State Fragility

“State fragility” describes weakness of governments or their deficiencies in such important tasks as exercising their authority, having the capacity to take care of people’s critical needs such as education, and the legitimacy to enforce commonly agreed upon rules (Mujtaba, 2025a). Yet, state fragility can be seen from many different paradigms. For example, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines state fragility as a country's risks and vulnerabilities to internal and external risks or shocks, which can lead to a breakdown in state authority, legitimacy, and capacity to deliver basic services to its citizens. The OECD States of Fragility 2022 report emphasizes that fragility “is the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacities of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks...It occurs in a spectrum of intensity across six dimensions: economic, environmental, human, political, security and societal" (OECD, 2022, para. 1).

The World Bank has seen state fragility as situations where governments lack the capacity, legitimacy, or authority to effectively govern their own territories or provide basic services to their citizens. The Fund for Peace (FFP) sees fragility as a dynamic and complex phenomenon or situation that encompasses a wide range of indicators, including social, economic, political, and security factors that contribute to a nation's vulnerability to instability and conflict. The Brookings Institution see state fragility as conditions where a country's institutions become weak, ineffective, or illegitimate, and the government cannot provide basic services, maintain law and order, or protect its citizens from civil unrest, violence and exploitation. Harvard University's Center for International Development (CID) sees state fragility as the government’s inability to provide basic security, justice, and welfare to its citizens, due to weak institutions, poor governance, and/or limited capacity to deliver public goods and services (Harvard University, 2020; Ines, 2017; Lanati & Thiele, 2018)

Regardless of how state fragility is defined or seen, the common elements are very present in Afghanistan. As the case of Afghanistan and several other nations have shown over the

past decades, armed conflict, as a common denominator, has been pushing a growing minority of the global population into a deeper crisis (Ahmadzai et al., 2025; Mujtaba, 2007). Additionally, the armed conflicts have resulted in untold suffering and hardship for millions of people in the South Asian region. The reality is that poverty and unemployment can elevate the risk of conflicts among groups in any country which then can easily lead to a self-reinforcing trend, known as the *fragility trap*, that keeps countries away from political stability and any hope of quick prosperity (Seyoum, 2024). Prolonged conflicts in fragile states have destroyed lives and livelihoods, devastated infrastructure, and disrupted international supply chains and trade in South Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other places throughout the world (Brinkerhoff, 2011; Faust, Grävingsholt, & Ziaja, 2015). As documented by many researchers, we also observe that conflict and instability have led to authoritarianism as well as limited supplies and skyrocketing inflation in food and fuel prices across many countries and regions (Zürcher, 2012; Brinkerhoff, 2014; Carment et al., 2015; Faroh & Shen, 2015).

In fragile states, we notice that authoritarian constitutions serve as “*window dressing*” that provide lip service to the rule of law and other fundamental freedoms without the actual intention of ever enforcing them (Seyoum, 2024). In fragile states, informal rules tend to govern the actions of individuals and organizations as well as the interaction of participants in the development process. In fragile states, conflict leads to institutional voids, consequently people engage in informal partnerships and various forms of real or perceived corruption and inequities to compensate for these gaps (Mujtaba and Seyoum, 2024). For example, over the past two decades in Afghanistan, when the formal government was supported by the international community, some people went to Taliban to resolve local conflicts since the public institutions did not have relevant capacities in place to help people in many provinces outside of the capitol city, Kabul. When existing institutions become inefficient and fragmented in a nation, people and informal groups work together to fill these societal gaps in each locality. Regarding conflict, state fragility and aid effectiveness, Zurcher (2012, p. 461) explains that “in fragile states, the interests of donor-peacebuilders and recipient governments are seldom aligned: recipients often lack the political will to implement reform, while donors lack the leverage necessary to promote fundamental change.”

Besides having sufficient resources necessary for living, basic universal education for all males and females in Afghanistan is an important key to making a fragile state strategically better, stronger, stable, and more prosperous. As of 2019, about 17% of the world's population remained illiterate compared to 78% in 1820. Sadly, today, millions of children of primary or secondary education age remain out of school because of extreme poverty, political insecurity or conflict, and their gender. Facts also show that half of the 3.5 million refugee children of primary school age do not go to school. Failure to educate young boys and girls not only comes at a high cost to their health and well-being but is estimated to cost the global economy about \$30 trillion in lost earnings and productivity. In fragile states, *destructive education* extinguishes peace-creating educational initiatives. Policy makers need to change such negative trends by converting them to *constructive education*, which establishes relevant structures that build peace and stability so all children can get the needed education. One function of the education system should be to mobilize all citizens “based on a strong national identity that is inclusive and open to individuals of any ethnic or religious group, i.e., it is an overarching, group-transcending collective identity” (Seyoum, 2024, p. 62). As socially responsible global citizens all over the world and one human race, “We must teach our children that if they conceive themselves as part of an ethnic group, they have not yet embraced the overarching national identity,” (Seyoum, 2024, p. 62) since strong associations with disparate cultural identities can threaten social harmony both within and among countries.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research uses the approach of reviewing and using literature, observations, and experience to draw practical conclusions involving a systematic and iterative process to state fragility. Such a qualitative approach traditionally begins with a comprehensive review of existing literature on the topic, including academic journals, books, and reputable sources to identify key concepts, theories, and findings relevant to the problem of state fragility. By integrating literature, observations, and experience, researchers can develop evidence-based recommendations that are grounded in both theory and reality. Such a qualitative approach to state fragility enables researchers to move beyond theory and develop practical solutions that can be applied.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to recent reports by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2025, para. 3), as of June 2024, about 122.6 million human beings were forcibly displaced around the world, and young children make up around 40% of such displaced population. Of course, since Afghanistan ranks among the top 20 climate-vulnerable countries, the unfortunate climate disasters have devastated many rural communities, further deteriorating stability. As a matter of fact, according to Displaced International (2025, para. 3), about 23.7 million Afghans are in acute need, with 11.6 million experiencing “catastrophic” food insecurity. Additionally, close to 3.2 million Afghans are internally displaced, and 8.2 million have sought refuge abroad, many in neighboring countries such as Iran, Pakistan, and Tajikistan.

Displaced International urges all nations dealing with displaced refugees to honor their commitments under the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees and other international legal frameworks, particularly the principle of non-refoulement because forcing refugees to return to conditions of widespread insecurity and deprivation violates fundamental universal rights and contradicts each nation’s obligations as a signatory to global conventions (Displaced International (2025, para. 5).

The “principle of non-refoulement” provides assurances that no displaced refugee should be returned to a nation where they might face cruel, inhuman, degrading punishment, or other such irreparable harm (UN Human Rights, 2025). So, the international community and policymakers should act decisively to prevent harm to displaced refugees throughout the world, as they already face unbelievable difficulties.

4.1. Is Afghanistan a Failed State?

In Afghanistan's case, the Fragile States Index (FSI) has consistently ranked the country among the most fragile states in the world. In 2022, Afghanistan was ranked 3rd out of 179 countries in terms of fragility. Afghanistan's scores are particularly low in areas such as security apparatus, factionalized elites, and state legitimacy (Fragile States Index, 2022). Nonetheless, one must carefully consider all elements of state fragility to critically assess its reality against such measures as the FSI indicators, since failed states make the world more insecure (Patrick, 2007; Scowcroft and Berger, 2005).

The short answer to the discussion of Afghanistan being a failed state is “no”. However, the classification of Afghanistan as a failed state can be a matter of ongoing debate among experts and scholars due to the historical political ups and downs which has impacted diverse groups throughout the country. In terms of a definition for a failed state, a failed state is typically characterized by various factors present in the nation, such as the collapse or weakness of governance, loss of control over territory, inability to provide public services, erosion of legitimacy, and high levels of violence and insecurity.

While some of the factors associated with a failed state do apply to the situation in Afghanistan, some are not relevant, and others have improved or are stabilizing. It is a fact that Afghanistan has faced significant challenges over the past five decades, and especially since the US-led invasion in 2001 and the subsequent Taliban insurgency. Over the past several decades, Afghanistan has chronically struggled with persistent instability and violence, weak governance and corruption, limited control over territory (particularly in some of the rural areas), inadequate public services (e.g., healthcare and education, especially for young girls and women), and economic struggles, including opium trade and aid dependency on the international community and non-governmental organization (NGOs).

Exploring the recent data on Afghanistan, as presented in Table 1, the SFI 2024 Global Data indicates a high degree of SF in areas of security (luckily there has been improvements since 2021), uneven development, human flight and brain drain, state legitimacy, reduced public services, human rights concerns, and inconsistency in the rule of law. These deficiencies indicate the degree of state fragility in Afghanistan. Afghanistan’s score on security is now higher than that of Somalia, but historically both countries have had high levels of political turmoil over the past few decades. In terms of uneven development scores, Afghanistan is higher than Yemen and Syria. Afghanistan’s overall ranking of being the 7th most fragile state in 2024 (FSI 2024) is a huge concern which many can consider as a “failed state” status. In the same report, Ethiopia is ranked 12th being slightly ahead of Myanmar, Chad, Haiti, and the Central African Republic. Afghanistan is also categorized as a country on high alert status with an overall fragility score of 103.9. Other nations on high alert status include Yemen, Syria, Sudan, South Sudan, and Democratic Republic of Congo with overall fragility scores of 101 to 109.

Somalia belongs in the very high alert status group with a score of 111.3. Based on the data, Afghanistan is a fragile state on high alert status. Yet, some researchers and practitioners may categorize Afghanistan as a failed state which will deter some international investors and multinational corporations from doing business in the country. Yet, the good news is that being labeled as a fragile state or even a failed state is not a permanent condition since countries can move in and out of SF based on the existing strategies being implemented by the political leaders and their progress.

Table 1 - Fragile States Index Global Data from 2007-2021

Most Fragile States		Least Fragile States	
Country	Rank	Country	Rank
Somalia	1st	Portugal	164th
Sudan	2nd	Singapore	165th
South Sudan	3rd	Germany	166th
Syria	4th	Austria	167th
Congo Democratic Republic	5th	Sweden	168th
Yemen	6th	Australia	169th
Afghanistan	7th	Netherlands	170th
Central African Republic	7th	Luxembourg	171st
Haiti	9th	Canada	172nd
Chad	10th	Ireland	172nd
Myanmar	11th	Switzerland	174th
Ethiopia	12th	Denmark	175th
Palestine	13th	New Zealand	175th
Mali	14th	Iceland	177th
Nigeria	15th	Finland	178th
Libya	16th	Norway	179th

Source: FSI 2024 Global Data. Retrieved on December 4, 2024, from:
<https://fragilestatesindex.org/global-data/>

Overall, arguments for considering Afghanistan as a failed state tend to focus on the persistent insurgency and terrorism (Piazza, 2008), ineffective governance and corruption, humanitarian crises (e.g., refugee displacement, food insecurity), economic stagnation, and continued dependence on foreign aid. Of course, the arguments against considering Afghanistan a failed state tend to be regarding the existence of a functioning government (albeit fragile even when it was supported by the international forces), international recognition and diplomatic relations, ongoing efforts to rebuild infrastructure and institutions, resilience, and adaptability of the Afghan people to the challenging conditions.

The status and situation in Afghanistan include the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, which comprise factors that are usually associated with a failed state, such as the education of young girls and women which has rapidly deteriorated and become non-existent beyond sixth grade. Additionally, Afghanistan faces increased human rights concerns from various international communities, a possible economic collapse, food and humanitarian crises as some displaced refugees from neighboring countries are forced to return, and prolonged international isolation.

Security has improved immensely over the past four years, despite the economic downturn once the international community left Afghanistan. While Afghanistan exhibits some characteristics of a failed state, it is probably more accurate to describe it as a "fragile state" or "weak state." Nonetheless, today, the country's situation is complex, as there are both state and non-state actors who are competing for control of the resources and region.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Afghanistan's state fragility is driven by a combination of historical, political, economic, and social factors. The nation's fragility has been consistently characterized by a weak and ineffective government, a dominant informal economy, and a persistent insurgency. The consequences of state fragility in Afghanistan are far-reaching, including widespread poverty, inequality, and human rights abuses. To transition out of state fragility and high alert status, Afghanistan's leaders must adopt a comprehensive and inclusive approach that addresses the root causes of instability and promotes sustainable economic development, good governance, and human security.

To achieve economic prosperity, Afghanistan's leaders can take specific actions, such as establishing a national dialogue forum, creating gender equality, promoting transparency and accountability, and strengthening local governance. Additionally, investing in human capital, fostering economic diversification, and promoting regional cooperation can help to build a more resilient and sustainable economy. By addressing the root causes of state fragility and promoting inclusive and sustainable development, Afghanistan can transition towards a more peaceful, prosperous, and stable future. This will require a sustained commitment to reform, a willingness to engage in inclusive dialogue, and a focus on building strong and effective institutions.

The growth of state fragility with weak capacity to carry out basic governance functions, like keeping local people and businesses safe, has been leading to unacceptable levels of human suffering in Afghanistan. As such, this paper provided a multidisciplinary analysis of state fragility that can be put into practice by Afghan leaders. Overall, politicians, public and private sector leaders, and academic researchers who are interested in entrepreneurship, economic and business policy, international trade, and emerging market development must work together to apply the recommended concepts in Afghanistan to transition the country out of state fragility by promoting sustainable peace and economic developments.

6. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The people of Afghanistan can and must transition from having a fragile state that is on high alert status and on the periphery of being seen as a failed state to a stronger economy. Engaging their talented human resources asset throughout the country and strategic planning, Afghanistan's transition out of state fragility requires a multifaceted strategic approach that addresses the root causes of instability in each locality, city, and region.

Ultimately, Afghanistan's transition out of state fragility requires a sustained commitment to peace, stability, and continuous development of its human resources asset through modern education and environmental civility for all men and women (Zeeshan et al., 2024). This necessitates continued international support, as well as a willingness from Afghan leaders to implement reforms, combat corruption, create gender equality, and promote national unity (Nguyen et al., 2013; Koester et al., 2016). By addressing these

challenges and seizing opportunities using various artificial intelligence technologies through ethical means (Mujtaba, 2025c), Afghanistan can build a more resilient and prosperous future for all its citizens. More specifically, as a starting point, the following are specific actions Afghan leaders can take to transition the nation out of state fragility:

1. Establish a national dialogue forum.
2. Promote transparency and accountability.
3. Create gender equality.
4. Strengthen local governance.
5. Foster economic diversification.
6. Improve access to justice.
7. Enhance security sector governance.
8. Support reconciliation and reintegration.
9. Invest in human capital.
10. Foster regional cooperation.

Such actions combined with the full and transparent engagement of the local, national and international communities can help Afghanistan's leaders address the root causes of state fragility, promote stability and prosperity, and transition the entire nation towards a more resilient and sustainable economic outlook.

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