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*Focus*

# Handle with Care! A Qualitative Comparison of the Fragile States Index's Bottom Three Countries: Central African Republic, Somalia and South Sudan

**Tim Glawion, Lotje de Vries and Andreas Mehler**

**ABSTRACT**

For the past four years, the Fund for Peace has ranked the Central African Republic, Somalia and South Sudan as the 'most fragile states' in the world, in its annual Fragile States Index (FSI). The three countries' almost identical scores suggest comparability; however, critics raise concerns about the FSI's data aggregation methods, and its conflation of causes and consequences. This article treads the uncharted path of unpacking the empirical realities that hide behind FSI indicators. Drawing on data collected during field research in the three states, the authors investigate three security indicators (security apparatus, factionalized elites, and external intervention) and propose an alternative, qualitative appreciation. Each country's fragility is based on how security forces, elites and interventions evolved over time and installed themselves differently in each region of the country. The qualitative assessment presented here shows that not every indicator matters in all cases at all times or throughout the country. Most crucially, the authors unveil enormous differences between and within the FSI's three 'most fragile states'. Such variations call for better-adapted and more flexible intervention strategies, and for quantitative comparisons to be qualitatively grounded.

## INTRODUCTION

Fraternally ranked alongside each other, the Central African Republic (CAR), Somalia and South Sudan share the dubious honour of being the world's 'most fragile states' according to the Fragile States Index (FSI) (Messner et al., 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). The index's aggregation of a vast

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array of predominantly quantitative data on security, political, economic and social indicators suggests comparability and impartiality. However, these three states' characteristics and trajectories are widely divergent. South Sudan is embroiled in fighting between government and different opposition forces, and faces a deadlock on the peace agreement. Somalia is marked by the fragmentation of legitimate authority into smaller political entities — one of which, Somaliland, has been able to create a surprising level of stability. The CAR has seen successive governments undermine its territorial sovereignty by neglecting the peripheries and public institutions. This has resulted in a state of chronic crisis that periodically flares up to the level of civil war. Immediately, the three states' storylines are completely dissimilar in terms of political will, administrative capacity, and territorial structuring. Despite their radically different security challenges, internationally led remedies oddly resemble one another, consisting of transitional governments, demobilization processes and robust peacekeeping forces.

Academic circles have been highly critical of using and applying fragility rankings. Critiques vary according to academic culture. For instance, positivistic studies tend to express reservations about the data and the way they are compiled, often not challenging the aims of such indices but instead searching for improved indicators, proxies and ways to weigh various components (Carlsen and Bruggemann, 2013; Hughes et al., 2011). Constructivist academics, who focus on qualitative data, tend to challenge the notion of 'fragile states' and the implicit assumptions underlying the quantitative work that underpins the rankings (Grimm et al., 2014; Kaplan, 2014). Meanwhile, area studies scholars typically highlight the need to understand individual cases and to only engage in comparison on a sound basis in order to facilitate generalization and specification (Basedau and Köllner, 2007). Others have pointed to the various ways in which the concept of fragility has been appropriated for political purposes and policy interventions by both donor and recipient countries (Lemay-Hébert and Mathieu, 2014).

As authors, we appreciate most of these criticisms. Nonetheless, we believe it is worthwhile to acknowledge the discursive powers of the FSI and other similar rankings,[1] which in certain policy circles are seen as instruments that can help to create order and steer priorities. We use the FSI in our lectures — although we problematize its content. Despite its limitations, the ranking provides a platform through which we are able to justify the relevance of our respective research to funders, students and media.

This article acknowledges the power of the FSI by taking its unit of analysis (the sovereign nation) and its indicators as the starting point of our analysis. We have chosen to focus on the FSI, as it is the most well known: it is published annually in the influential journal *Foreign Policy* and is cited in multiple international newspapers (e.g. *The Economist*, *The Financial*

1. Such as the OECD's annual State of Fragility report and the special 'fragile state units' of some foreign offices.

*Times*, *The Washington Post*). Additionally, heavy correlation of different indices due to similar data pools (Mata and Ziaja, 2009: 29; Ziaja, 2012) allows the critique of the FSI's measurement and applicability for policy to stand for other rankings. We use these indicators to develop an alternative, qualitative assessment in which we offer insights into the temporal and spatial differences in each of the three countries. Through a qualitative comparative analysis of the three 'most fragile states', we empirically fill some of the many blanks that the FSI leaves open. Drawing on the FSI's three security indicators, we show that the nature of 'fragility' in each of the three worst-scoring countries varies greatly despite the similarity suggested by the FSI rankings. This contribution assesses the indicators 'security sector', 'factionalized elites', and 'external interventions' to unmask the lack of likeness and show why simplification — arguably one of the FSI's merits — is, at times, simply wrong.

We first briefly clarify some of the conceptual underpinnings of our writing on the FSI. We then contrast the three indicators in our case countries with the clearly differing trajectories found on the ground. Temporal and spatial variations and political contestations of statehood are essential to questioning the seemingly similar fragility levels. We conclude by highlighting a key lesson learned from our qualitative comparative appraisal of the three 'most fragile states': the need to weigh different indicators and their contributions to 'fragility' more comprehensively through a qualitative appreciation of differences in form and territorial distribution of fragility. Thereby, we urgently discourage the use of international blueprint approaches in response to different types of fragility settings.

## APPROACHES AND CONSTRAINTS TO MEASURING FRAGILITY

The FSI and other fragility indices employ broad definitions of fragility revolving around three dimensions of state effectiveness, authority and legitimacy (Mata and Ziaja, 2009: 4f). The indices fill these dimensions with varying quantifiable indicators that measure a state's deficit towards a consolidated state ideal. From a conceptual viewpoint, we prefer assessing allegedly 'fragile' contexts through the more neutral and analytically open lenses of 'negotiated statehood' (Doornbos, 2010; Hagmann and Péclard, 2010), public authority (Lund, 2006; Vandekerckhove, 2011), or hybrid political orders (Boege et al., 2009; Meagher, 2012). These lenses allow us to assess the FSI's quantitative fragility indicators through qualitative analysis. Rather than what is lacking, we can thereby approach measuring what is present. Fragility is an open setting, in which multiple political orders cohabitate, wherein different groups and institutions compete over claims to authority without one actor being able to steer the overall direction of political order.

Although most current fragility indices are deemed unfit for academic research (Mata and Ziaja, 2009: 35), some academics nevertheless use them

for policy relevant analysis, such as on aid effectiveness (Toh and Kasturi, 2014). While the function of indices 'is to simplify and isolate' (Gutiérrez et al., 2011: 8),[2] such reduction has its limits. The FSI distorts quantitative rankings through compensatory effects during aggregation. Hypothetically, a country that has high levels of brain drain but low levels of conflict is ranked alongside a country with high conflict, but low brain drain, if all other indicators are equal. In fact, 'brain drain' is statistically more influential in the FSI ranking than most other sub-indicators (Carlsen and Bruggemann, 2013: 21).[3] Furthermore, the linear ranking necessitates aggregating incomparable categories onto one ordinal scale. The FSI performs particularly poorly in this regard as nearly two thirds of ranked pairs are incomparable (Gutiérrez et al., 2011) — meaning that their respective rank could as likely be reversed.[4]

The notion of a fragile state has also been criticized for conflating institutional settings (that is, statehood) and the occurrence of conflict (Easterly and Freschi, 2010). Thus, the FSI evaluates state fragility in the 'security sector' by the degree of conflict or '*pressures and measures related to*: Internal Conflict, Small Arms Proliferation, Riots and Protests, Fatalities from Conflict, Military Coups, Rebel Activity, Militancy, Bombings, Political Prisoners' (Messner et al., 2016: 13). While it is a worthy endeavour to collect this information for conflict-ridden cases such as the CAR, Somalia and South Sudan, it begs the question whether these are simply indicators of fragility or whether they represent mechanisms of how states become more fragile. Conflation of cause and consequences makes fragility indices unusable both for causal analysis and for the development of policy remedies. Through our qualitative discussion of the three security indicators we disentangle causes from outcomes, and decipher the different impact each causal indicator has on the level of fragility.

In the policy world, fragility indices are used for myriad purposes. International organizations and development cooperation bodies employ different indices or their subcomponents to allocate aid funds to countries or to formulate policy advice or research reports.[5] While organizations such as the World Bank or the European Commission with its Global Vulnerability and Crisis Assessment (GVCA) develop their own indices, others use a mix of

2. The FSI's core data generation tool is the 'Conflict Assessment System Tool' which applies automated content analysis of electronically available documents.
3. The Fund for Peace's new online tool 'my FSI' allows readers to individually weigh the twelve indicators. This is not truly an innovation as analysts could weigh and select indicators using the raw data even before. See http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/introducing-myfsi/
4. Gutiérrez et al. recommend using non-compensatory aggregation methods and urgently press for the combination of quantitative and qualitative research on fragility (2011: 2f)
5. As an example: 'Bilateral aid from Scandinavian countries, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the Special Partnership for Africa all draw on the CPIA ratings in allocating aid', quoted in Mata and Ziaja (2009: 8) from a report that is no longer available: Minson, A.T. (2007) 'Dialogue on the CPIA and Aid Allocation'. Rapporteur's Report. Initiative for Policy Dialogue.

different rankings. The OECD's *States of Fragility 2015* draws on the World Bank Group's Harmonized List of Fragile Situations for 2014 and the FSI, specifically those countries in the 'alert' or 'warning' categories (OECD, 2015: 15), and so does the UK's DFID (Ferreira, 2017: 1298). In *States of Fragility* the OECD recommends the development of targets and norms for tracking peace and security spending in fragile states (OECD, 2015). Being labelled a fragile state has repercussions on the international scene because fragility is recurrently portrayed as a risk for other states (Kaplan, 1994; Piazza, 2008; Rice, 2005). Conflict co-occurring with an alleged fragile state can act as a legitimization for foreign intervention (ICISS, 2001: xii). The FSI's alleged scientific assessment shapes such perceptions on where intervention is justified. Former CIA director John McLaughlin, for instance, recently stated that the FSI is a 'remarkable and welcome document' wherein 'you actually have real data' (McLaughlin, 2017).

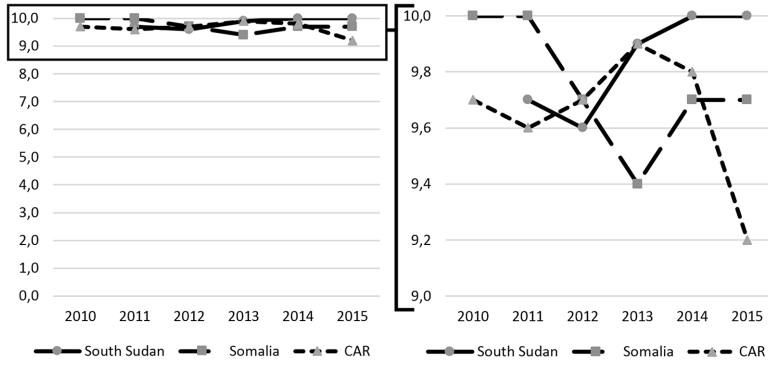
Using the three FSI security indicators as the basis of this comparative analysis of the three 'most fragile states', we show how the temporal and spatial variations between and within the three countries affect fragility and explain what this tells us about the value of the FSI as a policy-development tool. Our analysis of the temporal variation is informed by and rooted in long-term developments, but focuses specifically on shifts within the past six years.[6] The spatial dimension accounts for variation between various regions within the same territory. Our insights are based on our long-standing research in and on these three countries and empirical data collected during our research project on security governance in nine peripheral localities of these same countries between 2013 and 2016. We conducted over 200 interviews with security stakeholders, over 40 focus group discussions with local society members, worked with local informants who wrote monthly reports, and visited most research sites twice.

**Security Apparatus**

The FSI measures the security apparatus mostly through quantitative proxies related to conflict and violence, such as fatalities in conflict, political prisoners, or bombings (Messner et al., 2016: 13). From a more qualitative perspective, the formal security apparatuses range from a deliberately weakened state security sector in the CAR, to fragmented but state-like forces in Somalia, and militias turned repressive government in South Sudan. Nevertheless, over the last six years, the three countries' FSI security apparatus scores have differed by a maximum of 0.8 points on a scale up to 10.0 (in the 2016 index, which appears in Figure 1 as the actual year measured, that is, 2015; see footnote 6) and a maximum of 0.7 within one country (CAR

6. To avoid confusion, we always refer to actual years of the event or data point, not the year of publication of the FSI report, which is usually in the following year.

*Figure 1. FSI Security Apparatus Scores*




*Source*: based on Messner et al. (2014, 2015, 2016)

2013 to 2015). While these minimal quantitative nuances suggest similarity and continuity, qualitative insights reveal a highly dynamic situation and great variation between the three 'most fragile states'. The CAR's roughly 7,000 armed state security personnel[7] — for a territory of 622,984 km$^2$ and 4.5 million inhabitants — stands in stark contrast to South Sudan's 300,000 personnel[8] and Somalia's 50,000 central and substate personnel[9] for roughly the same territory size and populations of 12 million and 12.5 million, respectively. The most recent FSI security apparatus scores of 9.2, 10.0 and 9.7, respectively, fail to convey these enormous differences. As an alternative, we investigate the size, evolution and spatial variation of the security apparatus (Mehler, 2012). The size gives some indication of a state force's potential to effectively further the state's monopoly of the use of violence. More importantly, analysing spatial variations in similarly sized countries highlights both different trajectories in varying substate regions and the relationship between periphery and centre. Table 1 presents a summary of this qualitative assessment.

The CAR has never had a substantial army. At the end of Jean-Bédel Bokassa's reign in 1979, a maximum of 7,500 troops served in the Forces Armées Centrafricaines (FACA); by the mid-1990s this number had dropped by about half, and in 2006 only 1,250 troops out of 4,000 were considered

7. The Inspector General of the Armed Forces spoke of 7,000 currently enrolled army members, of whom he could not guarantee that more than around 2,000 are operational. The gendarmerie, he said, officially has 4,000 officers and the police should be smaller than that, of which only parts are operational (Interview, Inspector General of the Armed Forces, Bangui, 20 August 2017).
8. As estimated by Alex de Waal (2014).
9. Somali National Army and police: 13,000 and 6,000; Puntland army and police: 5,000–10,000 and 2,500; Somaliland forces: 15,000 and 7,000. See Caspersen (2012), Hills (2014) and IRIN (2013).

*Table 1. Qualitative Assessment of the State Security Apparatus*

| | CAR | Somalia | South Sudan |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Size (estimate)* | Military: 2,000<br>Police, etc.: 3,000 | Military: 35,000<br>Police, etc.: 15,000 | Military: 240,000<br>Police, etc.: 90,000 |
| *Evolution* | Recruitment along criteria of loyalty/ethnicity | Militias transformed into parallel substate forces | Opposing militias assembled into one security apparatus |
| *Spatial Variation* | Mostly confined to capital | Multiple independent substate forces; Territorial disputes | Spread throughout the territory; Frequent splits |
| *Impact on Fragility* | High: Unable to secure citizens, the state and the territory | Medium: Successful security provision in the north, contested in the south | High: State forces themselves destabilize the state |

operational by the United Nations (UNSC, 2006). Bozizé, President of the CAR from 2003 to 2013, feared a coup from his army and thus did not provide them with adequate weaponry. FACA's lack of effectiveness became very clear in March 2013, when the Séléka alliance of armed groups was able to simply march into the capital and take power. By the time the most serious phase of the armed conflict started in December 2013, the remainder of the security forces had mostly dissolved. Even though a new president was installed after successful democratic elections in early 2016, the possibility of asserting a legitimate state monopoly lies in the distant future.

Whereas the CAR's state forces can be considered relatively patriotic and neutral (despite former presidents often recruiting for the special forces along ethnic lines), Somalia's and South Sudan's armed forces tend to be more partisan due to the fact that they emerged from former militias that fought many years of civil war. After the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the Sudanese government in 2005, an extensive reshuffling and reintegration exercise of the formerly warring parties within the south was carried out at all levels of the various forces (Pinaud, 2014). Numerous rebel leaders — who had once opposed the SPLA — joined the SPLA while keeping their ranks and the command of their loyal troops, preventing the creation of a national army. Despite the size of its forces, the government's monopoly of the use of force was often challenged — for instance, by David Yau Yau's rebellion in the east of the country in 2012 and 2013, and the Arrow Boys in the west (Schomerus and de Vries, 2014). The inherent dangers of failing to build one integrated national army became apparent in December 2013, when a war broke out among sections of official state forces (Rolandsen, 2015). The FSI fails to capture this dramatic change. A mere 0.4 change between 2012 and 2015 hardly reflects a situation in which the armed forces are becoming fractured largely along ethnic and regional lines, basically splitting into those loyal to President Kiir and those opposing the government (de Vries and Justin, 2014; de Waal, 2014). The August 2015

peace agreement continued to allow the leaders of armed groups to exercise influence over, and control of, different sectors of the security forces without civilian oversight. By July 2016, the factions had split and had begun to fight one another yet again.

The situation in Somalia resembles that in South Sudan with regard to the prominent role played by armed-group leaders, with the difference that armed groups in Somalia remained confined to certain territories. Government forces' abuse of civilians in the 1980s left a permanent stain on the legitimacy of central authority. The current internationally backed government has a mixed human rights record, and the African Union (AU) mission remains incapable of delivering justice, even in those areas 'liberated' from Al-Shabaab (UNMOG, 2013; Williams, 2016). On the positive side, in many areas of the de facto state of Somaliland there is comparative stability and peace, which stem from years of negotiations between clan, military and political leaders carried out in the 1990s and has led to a degree of complementarity between the Somaliland police forces and non-state civilian and clan leaders (Ali et al., 2008; Lewis, 2008). Within substate entities such as Somaliland, Puntland, certain areas controlled by Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa (ASWJ), and — some might even argue — areas controlled by Al-Shabaab,[10] security forces provide an astonishing degree of stability that is completely disregarded by bottom-end FSI scores (Hagmann and Hoehne, 2009; Hills, 2014; Leonard and Samantar, 2011; Verhoeven, 2009). That is not to say that there are no tensions remaining. Even the allegedly model case of Somaliland witnessed high levels of conflict shortly after independence (Bradbury, 2008) and occasional clashes recur even today in some of its eastern regions (Hoehne, 2015). It is precisely this variation that calls for explanation.

The FSI security apparatus indicator fails to grasp pockets of successful security governance as it only measures *in*security. This tendency can promote a one-sided narrative. In the case of Somalia, the distinct historical origins of different armed factions have heavily shaped its security apparatus. Armed groups delinked from the centre and created separate political entities (Doornbos, 2002; Hagmann and Hoehne, 2009). This fragmentation — and not merely the threat posed by the radical Islamist Al-Shabaab — is the key to understanding the country's persistent instability. Unlike the other two cases — where armed groups aim at controlling the central state, which includes the symbolic act of taking over the capital — Somalia's armed groups are territorial (Hoehne, 2016). The former Somali National Movement took control of Somaliland and formed a de facto (stable hybrid) state with a traditional governing system in 1991 (Ahmed and Green, 1999; Balthasar, 2013; Lewis, 2008; Walls, 2009). The former Somali Salvation Democratic Front formed the autonomous region of Puntland in

10. Interviews with refugees from Al-Shabaab areas, Dadaab, Kenya, June 2013.

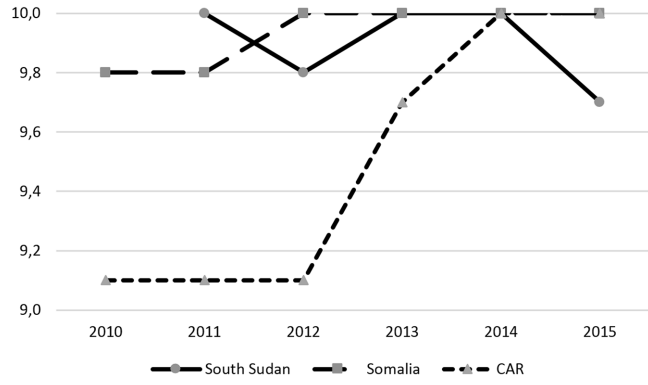
1998, but its political order remains less institutionalized than Somaliland's (Johnson and Smaker, 2014). Ahmed Madobe's Raas Kambooni took over the capital of Jubaland in 2013 (Mwangi, 2016), and the ASWJ are attempting to take control of Somalia's central areas. However, these political entities lack accepted borders, which makes territorial disputes between neighbouring substates a main driver of conflict. Even the conflict with Al-Shabaab — the perpetrator of gruesome terrorist attacks — takes its highest tolls in confrontations over the control of key cities in Somalia's south-centre. With more actors striving for their own substates, these disputes are bound to last (Hoehne, 2016).

Painting entire countries with a broad brush obscures key subnational variations at the heart of conflict in a world that has moved from interstate to intrastate wars (Pettersson and Wallensteen, 2015). Somalia might grant the most striking example of this misconception, but South Sudan could also benefit from a spatially differentiated depiction of its security variations. Parts of the country, especially the Greater Equatoria region, at first remained relatively stable. The renewed war only indirectly affected these more stable regions — for instance, repressive behaviour by government forces following rumours of renewed rebellions and confrontations between sedentary farmers and armed cattle herders. However, these areas have been increasingly drawn into the conflict, and — for a lack of differentiated analyses and policy — are put into the opposition-versus-government binary, irrespective of the fact that their interests have little to do with either side (ICG, 2016; de Vries and Schomerus, 2017).

In the CAR, the FACA predominantly served in the western part of the country, while some of the clearest security threats were present in the peripheries (north, north-east, south-east). For much of the country's history, most of the political contestation and related violence occurred in the capital Bangui. Coup attempts, the French military's operation to depose 'Emperor' Bokassa, and a series of bloody mutinies in 1996/97 illustrate this trend. At the same time, however, the uncontrolled inflow of small arms from adjacent conflict areas and dispersed resources facilitated the formation of rebellions opposed to the neglectful (often punitive) central state at the fringes of the country (ICG, 2007; Lombard, 2015).

The historical and social origins of state security services have an important impact on the viability of a state-centred monopoly of force and the possibility of state forces (violently) dividing. In South Sudan, official state forces have split and continue to fragment even further. In Somalia, forces fragmented decades ago, creating numerous parallel security apparatuses below the national level. Although CAR state forces did not split into different ethnic or regional factions during the rebellion and civil war of 2012 and 2013, they did not actively combat the rebellion and thereby allowed non-state factions to gain a prominent role — some soldiers even joined armed groups. The FSI's almost identical scores for the largely absent Central African, highly militarized South Sudanese, and fragmented Somalian

*Figure 2. FSI Factionalized Elites Scores*




*Source*: based on Messner et al. (2014, 2015, 2016)

security apparatuses hide crucial differences and causes of each country's possible return to conflict.

**Factionalized Elites**

The FSI measures factionalized elites by looking at power struggles, defectors, flawed elections and political competition. The three countries' scores ranged from 9.1 (CAR) to 10.0 (South Sudan) in 2012 but all scored 10.0 (the worst score) by 2014 (see Figure 2). However, these numbers say little about fragility in the countries in question without a qualitative assessment. In-depth research puts into question whether problematic and simplified dichotomies of elite factions (e.g. ethnic conflict in South Sudan, the Christian–Muslim divide in the CAR, and the terrorist Salafi threat in Somalia) can account for changing patterns over time and across territory. Current elite factions trace their roots to key events of the past decades. Only occasionally — but all the more crucially — do new factions enter the elite fold, mostly in episodes of violent regime change. The key to understanding the violent or cooperative interaction between elite factions lies in their geographic distribution: are they centred in the capital arena, or do the regions create multiple, overlapping elite arenas? Table 2 offers a summary qualitative assessment of factionalized elites in the three countries.

South Sudan's elite draw their status from a combination of dominant ethnic groups and military culture. Upon signing the CPA in 2005, SPLA and other military leaders took on most of the southern government positions. A popular and collective ambition, to guarantee a successful secession from the Republic of Sudan, contributed to relative stability prior to the referendum in 2011. However, the aftermath of the 2010 elections provided a

*Table 2. Qualitative Assessment of Factionalized Elites*

| | CAR | Somalia | South Sudan |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Size* | Small and diverse | Large and pluralized | Large and factionalized |
| *Evolution* | Rotating elites through regime change; Marginalized civilian elites | Interdependent and competing factions of elites within substates | Militarization through armed struggle; Strongly marginalized civilian elites |
| *Spatial Variation* | Concentrated in capital | Spread; Different elite factions dominate each substate | Spread; Some regional elites contest central authority |
| *Impact on Fragility* | Medium: Exclusionary and detached from support base | Low: Negotiation as means to settle competing claims | High: Violence as means to increase relative power |

first indication of the fierce and violent competition between elite members from different ethnic and military backgrounds. Elite dynamics are often depicted as competition between the two largest ethnic groups, the Dinka and the Nuer, while elites from other ethnic groups are also part of national politics. Additionally, internal competition and regional differences are just as pertinent. For instance, Warrap state and Lakes state — both nearly entirely inhabited by various Dinka clans — have witnessed fierce competition between clans and subgroups over access to representation within local government, and the best grazing areas for cattle. Local elite dynamics, therefore, partly answer why the country fell apart so quickly after 2013 (Justin and de Vries, 2017; Pinaud, 2014). Factionalized elites, however, already scored 10.0 in 2011, which made it impossible for the FSI — as a bounded index — to show how the situation greatly worsened in the following years.

Before the rise of Al-Shabaab in 2006, Somalia's divisions were most commonly depicted along clan lines (Lewis, 1961, 2008; Michler, 1998). However, as the relative importance of religious leaders, influential businesspersons, state administrators and leaders of armed groups grows, other divisions begin to compete with and overlap clan narratives. In Somalia, factionalization does not lead to instability per se. In some areas of Somaliland, 'modern' administrative elites and 'traditional' clan leaders work together and complementarily improve security (Simojoki, 2011). Even in present-day war-ravaged south-central Somalia, the convergence of business leaders and sharia courts brought an impressive measure of stability to the capital for a brief period in 2005 and 2006 (Hansen, 2013; Menkhaus, 2007). In fact, ambitious aspirants to power now draw from multiple sources of legitimacy, including religious labels, armed leadership and even academic titles.

Compared to the other two countries, the CAR has a very small elite, and struggles are usually about entering the fold and accessing potential spoils — which is symbolized by the elite's almost exclusive concentration in the capital, Bangui. Ethnic, religious or economic markers, on the other hand, are weak (Wohlers, 2015). The recent conflict (2012–13) has

strengthened, rather than being caused by, the ever-growing fragmentation and intensifying rotation of elites: Bozizé was toppled by a rebellion from the country's most neglected areas of the north-east, which brought entirely new members into the leadership fold. However, the rule of President Djotodia (a Muslim and ethnic Gula; 2013–14) was short-lived (ICG, 2014). The internationally supported transition brought forth a more mixed government. Elections in early 2016 heightened such competition and brought Faustin Archange Touadéra into power. The new president included many known political elites in his government but excluded military stakeholders of the most recent crisis. With these rotations and fragmentations over the past decade, no dominant class could evolve.

While the CAR's score on this indicator increased from 9.1 to 10.0 — thereby hinting at some of the changes described above — the impact of a factionalized elite in the CAR is far from homogeneous throughout the territory: divides exist between the north and south as well as the east and west. Elites that take up camp in the capital quickly lose control over their peripheral support bases (Mehler, 2011). Meanwhile, those that remain in the provinces have a hard time getting their voices heard peacefully, which can result in taking up arms — the Séléka alliance is the most recent example. Insecurity, in addition to the absence of roads and communication networks, only exacerbates the disconnect between the centre and the peripheries. The country's recurrent conflict is often instigated in its peripheries, as the central government neither controls its fringes, nor is willing to provide those citizens with security or services. Despite the democratic change of government in the capital, elites from the peripheries are trapped between a lack of peaceful ways to gain a voice in the central state and the difficulty of staying connected to their original support bases. To put it bluntly, elites cooperate more closely with one another in the capital than they do with the people they allegedly represent in the peripheries.

Unlike the closed elite circles in the CAR, Somalia's plurality of elites within and between territories has granted a measure of representability, and thereby at times contributed to stability. The FSI's measure of factionalism can tell us little about Somalia's fragility without pointing out the geographic fault lines and differentiating between Somalia's varying areas and political entities. Clan elites based the 1998 formation of the autonomous Puntland state in the north-east on the territory's dominantly Darood identity (Hagmann and Hoehne, 2009; LPI, 2014). In Somaliland, in contrast to Somalia, the administrative government is gaining ground (Johnson and Smaker, 2014). Although Somalia used to be almost entirely Muslim Sufi, Salafism has taken root since the mid-20$^{th}$ century. Salafism is implanted more apolitically in Puntland and Somaliland, while being violently promoted by Al-Shabaab in the south-central part of the country (Baadiyow, 2015; Hansen, 2013; Marchal, 2004). The ASWJ movement took up arms to defend Sufi shrines and traditions against the Salafist Al-Shabaab (LPI, 2014; Marchal and Sheikh, 2013). The ASWJ are, however, sceptical of

the central state's will and ability to support their interests. They therefore sought an autonomous state in Galmudug and violently competed for control with a pro-government strongman until a truce was signed in late 2015.[11] Years of fighting in the south-central region increased the power of economically motivated leaders in this region both as warlords and as proponents of new modes of (business) stability (Menkhaus, 2006).

In South Sudan, the spatial variations between elites is visible locally and also nationally. In some central and western parts of the country, local elites oppose the dominance of cattle-keeping elites in local government and security agencies, but do not have well-adapted channels to voice their dissatisfaction to the national government. Institutionalized relations with the central government were further weakened after the heavy austerity measures of 2012 and 2013, in which all funds were collected at the central level and minimally redistributed to the provinces. Regional politicians, mostly from the three Equatoria provinces, called for regional differentiation via further federalization of the system of government through the strengthening of the 10 states. After fierce attempts to contain the debate on federalism, the government surprised the opposition, its citizens and the international community by unilaterally establishing 28 states (Schomerus and Aalen, 2016). While many citizens welcomed a strengthening of the federalized system in principle, many saw the decree as an attempt by government to create new local conflicts over the division of the territory and resources, and to further Dinka dominance in the country.

The FSI suggests that elite factionalization contributes to fragility. As is clear from the discussion above, this is only squarely the case for South Sudan. In order to contribute to fragility, the elite factions need to be linked to each country's security sector. In the CAR, a small, elite circle bars newcomers from the peripheries from voicing their demands through peaceful channels. These factions are neither particularly strong nor clearly defined; still they are obstacles to peace. It is therefore not factionalization, but a lack of regulated competition between elites that inhibits societal groups in the CAR from voicing their interests, peacefully, to the state. The larger number of elite factions in Somalia has allowed inhabitants to raise their issues through channels differentiated by both function and territory. Paradoxically, in areas such as Somaliland and Puntland, factional arrangements have created higher degrees of stability. In South Sudan, which presents the strongest elite factions, armed struggle has become the most pertinent, almost universal, approach to political competition, to the devastation of civilian voices and public safety.

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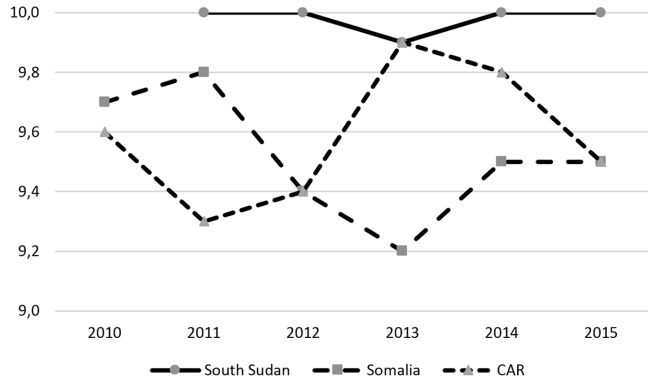
11. Infamous warlord Abdi Hassan Awale 'Qeybdiid' became Galmudug president in 2012. After the agreement in late 2015, former interior minister Abdikarim Hussein Guled took over the presidency of Galmudug and included ASWJ chairman Sheikh Ibrahim Hassan as minister of education (UNMOG, 2013).

*Figure 3. FSI External Intervention Scores*




*Source*: based on Messner et al. (2014, 2015, 2016)

**External Intervention**

The FSI's external intervention indicator is measured by, among other things, the presence of a peacekeeping mission, sanctions and foreign assistance. It thereby neglects the variable reasons for external intervention and the impact of informal foreign actors and interests. Moreover, external intervention is a factor that can hardly be distinguished as cause or consequence. External interventions impact internal fragility (and not always in a positive way) and are installed as a consequence of a country's fragility. This confounding of cause and consequence might explain why the FSI fails to grasp drastic changes such as (1) the immense enlargement of the peacekeeping mission in the CAR from under 1,000 peacekeepers at the onset of the crisis (FSI at 9.4) to almost 12,000 in 2015 (FSI at 9.5); and (2) the alleged stabilization of Somalia by 0.6 points (compared to 2011) following the integration of its perceived arch-enemy Ethiopia into the AU mission on 1 January 2014. With another over 10,000-strong peacekeeping mission present in South Sudan, the three countries' almost identical external intervention scores seem linked to the mere existence of large official international missions (see Figure 3). However, the strong variation in background conditions, modes of operation of peacekeeping missions, and other forms and sponsors of foreign interference, are apparently ignored. A look at the evolution of external intervention shows how it is linked both to geopolitical trends and, more recently, to regional power struggles. Especially when the latter comes into play, interveners often limit their missions to their respective border areas, creating a mosaic pattern of external missions in each country. A qualitative assessment of external intervention is presented in Table 3.

The UN mission in (southern) Sudan was set up in 2005 to monitor the peace agreement between the north and south, and to engage in state

*Table 3. Qualitative Assessment of External Intervention*

| | CAR | Somalia | South Sudan |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Size* | MINUSCA, 12,000; Sangaris (France), 800; RCI-LRA (Uganda), estimated 1,500 | AMISOM, 18,000 (Ethiopia and Kenya) | UNMISS, 10,000; Darfuri Rebels, up to estimated 10,000 |
| *Evolution* | From small regional to robust UN mission; Heavy interference in national politics | Growing neighbouring involvement to pursue national interest | Diminishing relevance in South Sudanese political and military affairs |
| *Spatial Variation* | Border zones versus centre: Neighbours extend security and economic influence across their borders | South-centre versus north: Exclusively operating in the south and centre, fighting Al-Shabaab | UNMISS dispersed over the territory, but with limited perimeter of activity |
| *Impact on Security* | Ambivalent: Immediate local security; Long-term substitution of state security apparatus | High and ambivalent: Fighting Al-Shabaab while upholding political division of Somalia | Medium: Limited coercive means; Struggles to protect civilians |

building. After South Sudan's independence, the nature and mandate of the UN mission did not change fundamentally. It was thus wholly unfit to deal with the conflict that erupted within the SPLM/A over the party leadership's monopoly of state access (Rolandsen, 2015). As soon as the conflict set in, many civilians sought refuge within the camps of the UN Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS). Withdrawing its support to government and state building, the UN mission recalibrated its mandate to include the protection only of those civilians residing in its UN protection sites, rather than all non-combatant civilians. As a result, UNMISS had to close down missions in areas that were considered stable enough. For instance, Raja county (present-day Lol state) was considered less of a priority, despite the great numbers of Darfuri rebels hiding there from Sudanese forces. Inhabitants dreaded the withdrawal of the UNMISS camp in late 2014. The UN mission was seen as a neutral observer and buffer that could have contributed to the protection of civilians simply by virtue of its military presence and the role of civilian liaison officers in the community. Nearly a year after the signing of the peace accord, Raja was attacked by an unknown rebel group and the newly established governor of Lol state fled to Wau, a town that also got caught up in fighting in June 2016.

Compared to the overall absence of national forces in the CAR, the recent plethora of external intervention missions is impressive: Ugandan troops on the CAR's far eastern territory were chasing the Lord's Resistance Army in the framework of a larger AU-led mission, which began in 2009, until their withdrawal in 2017 (Cakaj, 2015; Titeca and Costeur, 2015). French troops operated in the country as part of the separate Operation Sangaris from October 2013 to October 2016, and the interim African-led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic (MISCA) — sponsored by

the European Union Force (EUFOR) and the AU — secured the country before fully deploying the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) in late 2014 (Welz, 2016). The recently established MINUSCA mission allowed for elections as a provisional end to a prolonged transition phase in early 2016. While external powers had been involved in the CAR long before the recent crisis, MINUSCA is the first UN-led mission that is substantial in size and provides the basis for a long-term deployment. Our fieldwork in early 2016 suggests that MINUSCA has had an immediate impact on halting conflict and securing citizens, despite heavy local criticism for being ineffective and even dysfunctional. The larger, longer and more aloof the mission becomes, however, the more likely it is to substitute for the state's own necessary security reforms, and thereby contribute to long-term fragility.

The international peacekeeping mission in Somalia followed suit after an Ethiopian invasion in late 2006. After toppling the short-lived regime of the Union of Islamic Courts, the invasion attempt was hastily brought to an end by the resistance of Somali militias — the most prominent being Al-Shabaab (Menkhaus, 2007). The AU mission in Somalia (AMISOM) was meant to replace the Ethiopian troops and stabilize the country. It was largely unsuccessful in securing more than the capital for many years, while Al-Shabaab continued to control most of south-central Somalia and even threatened neighbouring states, particularly Kenya. In 2011, Kenya intervened in southern Somalia to stop Al-Shabaab from crossing its borders. In 2011 and especially in 2012, Ethiopia also sent troops back into Somalia's central regions. Kenya's and Ethiopia's armies were integrated into AMISOM in late 2013 and early 2014 respectively, which almost doubled the number of troops in the country and also undermined the mission's claim to neutrality (Williams, 2016). Despite these massive changes, Somalia's 2013 FSI external intervention score revealed a change of merely 0.6 points (compared to 2011). Surprisingly, the score change was a positive one, even though the mission enlargement literally fractured control throughout south-central Somalia and brought its perceived arch-enemy, Ethiopia, back into the country in an official capacity (Williams, 2016).

The variation between fragility and relative stability within Somalia goes beyond official interventions and partly stems from neighbouring states' more tacit forms of interference (Elmi, 2012; Verhoeven, 2009). All three neighbours have large Somali populations and fear a strengthened state that might again aggressively pursue a Greater Somalia, as former president Barre did in the 1970s, and thus try to keep their influence on the ground. Kenya assisted Ahmed Madobe and his Kenyan-trained, single-clan militia in forming Jubaland state, to the great distress of the other clans in the area, and of the central government in Mogadishu (ICG, 2013; Mwangi, 2016). Ethiopia competed with Kenya to become the godfather of any agreements on Somalia. While it played a stabilizing role in Somaliland and Puntland, its intervention legacy in the south is more contested. It is important to

note — something which is not reflected in the FSI scores — that Somaliland stabilized without any foreign military intervention and Puntland has only seen predominantly maritime missions. Thus, more or less intervention can hardly be considered an indicator of fragility. What matters is, who is there and why.

In the CAR, the apparent weakness of state forces to deal with rebel groups invited external powers to get involved in national politics, security, resource exploitation and regional power plays. At the same time, however, external involvement provided CAR elites with an easy way to guarantee their stay in power — whether with the help of France, Libya, Chad, or a rebel movement from across the River Oubangui (Marchal, 2015; de Vries and Glawion, 2015). A glance at informal agendas and actors can clarify the hidden motives of intervention. In the CAR, several states pursued their geostrategic interests by getting involved in the country's power struggles. At times, they cloaked their ambitions under an official mandate, such as in successive peacekeeping missions since 1998 (Meyer, 2009). The Chadian contingent serving in the MISCA, however, had to leave the mission after excessive violence against civilian protestors in Bangui on 29 March 2014. Even more clandestine engagements are frequent in the CAR: the Congolese militia leader Jean-Pierre Bemba was called upon by former president Patassé to crush a coup attempt in 2001. He was recently sentenced by the International Criminal Court (ICC). Patassé also counted on Libyan forces and helicopters to come to his aid during the coup attempt, which Chad resented. As a result, Chadian President Déby sided with another coup plotter, François Bozizé, who recruited followers with Chadian help and managed to overthrow Patassé in March 2003. After Bozizé's military takeover, the irregular Chadian troops who helped Bozizé seize power became new sources of insecurity in the countryside. Ironically, some of these 'liberators' would later join the Séléka rebellion that toppled Bozizé in March 2013.[12]

South Sudan, too, is subject to, and agent in, regional power struggles. Uganda and Sudan in particular have openly or unofficially been involved during the course of the war. President Kiir called for the Ugandan national army to assist in containing the rebellion and also allowed various Darfuri rebel groups onto South Sudanese territory in exchange for their support in battles against the SPLA-In-Opposition. External interventions in the country thus take various forms: some aim to protect civilians, while others are carried out by external actors at the invitation of the president to help him re-establish control over the territory. The president thus willingly shares the monopoly of the use of force not only with regular UNMISS forces but also with less transparent partners.

12. Interview, 'Colonel Gaddafi' of the ex-Séléka subgroup Mouvement Patriotic Centrafricaine, Paoua, 24 February 2016.

The effect of external intervention on fragility is ambiguous: although taking recourse to foreign military support may help to reduce fragility, over a longer period of time intervention might perpetuate structural fragility. The concealed motives of interveners might skew the relationship between military intervention and fragility; this is the case in the CAR, whose neighbours continue to treat the country's peripheries as their backyard (Marchal, 2015); in South Sudan, which finds itself at the centre of regional military and power struggles; and in Somalia, whose neighbours have an interest in both containing the terrorist threat and in keeping the country divided.

## CONCLUSION

The Fund for Peace's FSI ranking suggests a largely uniform trajectory from a bad situation of disorder — whereby 'weak and failing states pose a challenge to the international community' (Messner et al., 2016: 12) — to the universally desired monopolization of the legitimate use of force within the boundaries of sovereign states. Therefore, 'the Fragile States Index scores should be interpreted with the understanding that the lower the score, the better' (ibid.: 3). Our qualitative analysis of the FSI's three 'most fragile states' (the CAR, Somalia and South Sudan) runs counter to assumptions of such a linear, teleological trajectory. Rather, these three states differ radically on matters pertaining to the security sector, elite fragmentation and foreign intervention. Our examination has revealed such significant differences between and within cases, that grouping them together appears to offer little analytical value. Rethinking the analysis of fragility more generally, we thus propose a deeper appreciation of spatial and temporal variations.

The FSI (just like many other indicator systems) has been widely criticized in academia for a variety of reasons. It is analytically important, for instance, that fragility indices weigh indicators according to their general impact on fragility (e.g. brain drain less than open conflict) and their country-specific relevance, which the FSI fails to account for. Acknowledging the discursive power of the FSI's allegedly 'real data' (McLaughlin, 2017) on fragility, we contribute to this criticism by offering a qualitative assessment of its three key indicators on security. Assessing the world's three 'most fragile states' according to dimensions of temporal and subnational variation in (in)security production offers insights into the different types of fragility within each country labelled as fragile. We show that differing historical patterns and subnational variations of fragility create changing impacts for people and their relations to the central authority depending on where they live and when. The important ruptures that occurred within the three countries in recent years demonstrate the ranking's difficulty in adequately reflecting their impact on fragility. Small movements of a digital value (typically from

a measured 9.7 to 9.9 on a sub-indicator) cannot portray the frequently dramatic variation between years.

Our comparison between the three countries has unveiled that, beneath the label as the three most fragile states, lie very different environments of security on the ground. In the CAR, the absence of a security apparatus and an effective state is at the heart of the fragility and persistent insecurity that afflict the country. In South Sudan, it is precisely the size of the security apparatus (and its opponents that derive from it) and the government which are the source of insecurity and instability. In Somalia, the fragility of the central state in Mogadishu has created a situation in which other parts of the country, Somaliland and Puntland for example, have been able to create their own stability. Lumping conflict and fragility together thus overlooks potentially positive results that can result from fragility at the centre — as the Somalia case shows. There is diversity in fragility both in political form and across different parts of territory that fragility assessments need to reflect.

An appreciation of a country's fragility must thus encompass and account for spatial variation which implies delving into a country's peripheries to acknowledge the impact of internal variations. While the FSI uses a vast database of documents that includes insights from peripheral areas, the overall bias towards the capital is inherent in its emphasis on newspaper articles which are available online and statistics of international organizations. Furthermore, the FSI assesses fragility on an annual basis, which does not adequately capture temporal variations and fails to situate changes in a context of the *longue durée*. A more rigid appreciation of changes over time would uncover the varying historical and current trajectories of the countries' differing forms of fragility.

The minimal differences between the three cases with regard to the FSI's index and sub-indicator values for security suggest there is a similarity between the causes of fragility. This, in turn, suggests the remedies to fragility are similar. To the contrary, we have shown that the three countries in question reveal highly diverging features on the three sub-indicators analysed. While we acknowledge the discursive powers of instruments like the FSI in international policy arenas, we have shown that their explanatory value is misleading without an in-depth qualitative assessment. The Fund for Peace's aim to strengthen the abilities of the 'international community ... to be prepared to take the necessary actions' to stabilize fragile environments (Messner et al., 2016: 12) is well noted. As we have shown, a clear analysis of the differentiation between gradual changes and rapid shifts of fragility and between diverging developments in different parts of the country, and a qualitative appreciation of security indicators, is crucial. If reflected in the FSI ranking, these could, for instance, alert the international community to develop specific policies and interventions for the different forms of fragility in and within different countries. Focusing on spatial and temporal variation within and between countries judged as fragile represents a first

step in the quest for sound academic conclusions that generate authoritative orientations for practitioners and policy makers.

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