

Terrorist Black Holes: Global Regions Shrouded in Lawlessness

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Abstract

In light of the recent focus on international terrorism created by the 9/11 attacks, the international community has cultivated a growing interest in terrorist sanctuaries. These terrorist "black holes" are considered areas where effective state control is questionable and are inhabited by criminal, terrorist or militant non-state actors. By comparing and contrasting the fundamental elements that have caused these *terrorist black holes* to become havens for organized crime and terrorist activity, the international community will be able to associate terrorist groups with specific locations thus dissolving the secrecy of such areas and preventing their future creation.

Key words: Terrorism, Terrorist Black Hole, Safe-Haven, Sanctuary, Failed States

Introduction

The idea of *terrorist sanctuary* or *safe-haven* is not new. It has been an important part of anti-terrorist discourse for decades. In recent years, particularly since 9/11, *terrorist sanctuaries* and *safe havens* have been thrust to the forefront of counter-terrorism discourse. In order to locate, disrupt, and ultimately disband terrorist organizations law enforcement agencies need a method for locating possible havens. The answer comes in the form of the Terrorist Black Hole Theory. By identifying pockets of terrorist sanctuaries around the world, counter terrorist agencies will be able to hunt down and ultimately disband terrorist organizations.

Terrorist Sanctuaries and Black Holes

The concept of *terrorist sanctuaries* first gained popularity during the Cold War era. During this period, terrorism and insurgency were seen as being largely synonymous, thus a number of countries experiencing civil war—such as Vietnam, Guatemala, and the Philippines—were described as "terrorist havens" (Jackson, 2006). Furthermore, it was

also argued that communism itself provided ideological support and justification for terrorism. In the years following, broader discussions about the origins of terrorist ideology began to emerge in Western policy circles. Though sanctuaries were a hot topic of debate, little was discovered as to the cause of such places.

One of the most common arguments is that weak or failed states are primary locations for *terrorist sanctuaries*. More specifically, it has been argued that anarchic, geographically remote regions beyond the control of ineffectual states can function as a staging ground or haven for terrorism. The 9/11 Commission report stated:

To find sanctuary, terrorist organizations have fled to some of the least governed, most lawless places in the world. The intelligence community has prepared a world map that highlights possible terrorist havens, using no secret intelligence—just indicating areas that combine rugged terrain, weak governance, room to hide or receive supplies, and low population density with a town or city near enough to allow necessary interaction with the outside world. Large areas scattered around the world meet these criteria (9/11 Report, 2004).

At the time of 9/11, there were no distinguishing factors in the list of possible locations for *safe havens* in this report. Numerous characteristics need to be taken into account to prove an area a usable sanctuary. In short, at the time of the most devastating terrorist attack on U.S. soil, the U.S. Government had no construct to begin their search for terror suspects.

The term *Terrorist sanctuary* is generally applied to areas in which non-state insurgent organizations are able to undertake activities that support their terrorist operations. Two categories of *terrorist sanctuaries* exist. The first is formed by areas where the government plays a willing role as being the host-nation, where either the terrorist organization is knowingly present in the country and welcome, or governments create terrorist proxies and offer them bases within state borders. Prime examples were Libya, during the 1980s, when President Muammar Qaddafi provided the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) a headquarters in Tripoli and Pakistan's support of the Taliban refugee camps within its borders (Byman, 2005). Going further, Syria's willingness to allow Iran to funnel weapons to Hizbollah through its territories also shows a less direct form of government aid (Byman, 2005). These groups are generally state sponsored organizations that have local government support to achieve their various objectives.

The second—and the focus of this paper—are the areas where terrorist groups can plan and organize terror operations either without government knowledge or despite government efforts to end terrorist activity. This category is mostly found within states or areas that are considered "failing" (Korteweg, 2007). These areas are specified as *terrorist black holes*.

There is no limit to the size of these regions as terrorist groups create them through the exploitation of ungoverned areas. According to Rem Korteweg of the Center for Clingendael Center for Strategic Studies, *terrorist black holes* are the product of "the proliferation of lawlessness and instability of the international system" (Korteweg, 2007). The general thought is that the environments created in certain states with weak governance or capabilities are conducive to the activities of various terrorist groups and explains their presence in these areas (Korteweg, 2007). Both governmental weakness

and *terrorist comparative advantage*—terrorist groups/individuals/networks that are found in these areas that have specific characteristics which make the area attractive for the performance of terrorist support activities or the terrorist act itself—allow terrorist groups freedom of movement and action thus creating the attraction (Korteweg and Ehrhardt, 2005). According to the lectures of Mao Tse-tung on Partisan Warfare, “Freedom of action is the very life of an army and once this freedom is lost, an army faces defeat or annihilation” (Tse-tung, 1938). These areas grant an unfettered freedom of movement (Korteweg and Ehrhardt, 2005). This freedom from the bounds of all international/domestic law keeps these organizations perpetually ahead of counter-terrorism and law enforcement agencies.

Korteweg also determined that the characteristics that label an area a black hole have been in place for a substantial amount of time, mostly more than five years (Korteweg and Ehrhardt, 2005). This helps in the early identification of areas at risk of becoming black holes.

The Clingendael Center for Strategic Studies concluded— from a list of 41 *terrorist black holes* in the world found between 2000 and 2005— that four categories of factors have emerged that contribute to the lack of governmental control in an area— *ranking, location, geography, and observation* (Korteweg and Ehrhardt, 2005).

The first element, *ranking*, is that black holes are not homogenous— they are not all the same. The report stratifies the black holes on the basis of type of activity taking place in the area. Four categories have been identified ranging from 1 to 4. The first two are considered “battlefield” black holes where the terrorist engages in the mission itself. The latter two are considered to be “support” black holes, where the terrorist group finds conditions that are conducive to its support activities, such as, logistics, refuges and recruitment (Korteweg and Ehrhardt, 2005). This distinction between the type and use of an area is essential for determining the nature and intent of the terrorist presence. This specific classification aids in the determination of where specific types of organizations prefer to abide.

The second, *location*, shows a clear link between where a particular ethnic/religious community lives and the proximity of a terrorist group of a similar belief system. Location is an important factor, as community seems to be the key to *terrorist sanctuaries*. As with guerilla warfare, insurgents are granted freedom of movement and action by the population from which they draw logistic support, refuge, and accommodation (Korteweg and Ehrhardt, 2005). Conceptually, this strategic element flows from the military guerilla doctrine of Mao Tse-tung’s *Yu Chi Chan* (Tse-tung, 1937). Mao Tse-tung realized the value of support of the local population.

Without a political goal, guerrilla warfare must fail— if its political objectives do not coincide with the aspirations of the people and their sympathy, co-operation, and assistance cannot be gained— .Because guerrilla warfare basically derives from the masses and is supported by them, it can neither exist nor flourish if it separates itself from their sympathies and co-operation— .The moment that this war of resistance dissociates itself from the masses of the people is the precise moment that it dissociates itself from hope of ultimate victory...(Tse-tung, 1937).

In this sense, modern terrorism has roots stemming from unconventional warfare. Local support for political/religious aims of the organization is essential for success. This being said, community support can hinder efforts by law enforcement agencies.

Geography, like location, also plays on the base fundamentals of guerilla warfare. Geographic characteristics can both help and hinder freedom of movement for terrorist groups. It is important to note that this element should not only be seen as physical topography, this includes, but is not limited to, urban environments as well (Korteweg and Ehrhardt, 2005). The larger population in metropolitan cities also provides the ease of movement and desired privacy needed to support terrorist activities.

The last key element is perhaps the most important of the four *observation*. Of the four characteristics, the first three are clear-cut being defined by tangible facts. This element requires a more subjective approach by looking at all factors that effect the social workings of the region. An area's combination of particular religious/ethnic communities and an urban non-tolerant environment has the potential of being rendered a *terrorist black hole* (Korteweg and Ehrhardt, 2005). Places where the authority of (local) government is questionable, and where communities exist which have cultural beliefs similar to that of a terrorist group, or where there is ethnic strife, black holes are more likely to be created (Korteweg and Ehrhardt, 2005). The importance of these four elements rests in the application of them to places around the world. The ultimate goal of black hole identification is the prevention of such areas from forming.

Two case studies have been chosen to represent the different range of areas that could be considered terrorist black holes. Starting with known *terrorist black holes* the Tri-Border Area in Latin America and parts of southern Africa and black holes at sea the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Aden off the east coast of Somalia.

Known Terrorist Black Holes, Case-in-Point

In the world today there are numerous areas around the globe that have been identified as terrorist black holes. Two such places are the Tri-Border Area in South America and countries in southern Africa, specifically South Africa and Madagascar. The Tri-Border Area (TBA) where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay meet is a well-known *terrorist haven* for fund-raising, recruiting, and the plotting terrorist attacks. Islamic terrorist groups seen in this area include Egypt's al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (Islamic Group), al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hizbollah, and al-Muqawamah (the Resistance), which is a pro-Iran wing of the Lebanon-based Hizbollah (Hudson, 2003). The large Arab community in this area is highly conducive to the establishment of sleeper cells of Islamic militant groups, including Hizbollah and al-Qaeda (Hudson, 2003). According to a Library of Congress Report on the TBA, Hizbollah and al-Qaeda formed an alliance the cooperation is thought to be emblematic of a larger strategic alliance between the two organizations in the region as early as 1999 (Hudson, 2003). The report further asserts that a terrorist summit was held in the TBA in late 2002 to plan terrorist attacks against U.S. and Israeli diplomatic facilities in the South American region (Hudson, 2003). The cooperation shown between terror groups within the TBA illustrates a change in the traditional use of these black hole areas. For this region to be used as a host region for an Islamic terrorist summit, these organizations have begun to evolve and emulate that of their organized crime counterparts.

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Though this area is a bastion for terrorist activities, this region also plays host to international organized crime mafias and corrupt government officials. Between all three of these elements a mutually beneficial, symbiotic relationship has been born. Though exact estimates of annual profits are not available, it is estimated that Islamic fundamentalist groups in the TBA are sending between \$300 million and \$500 million a year in profits from drug trafficking, arms dealing, and other illegal activities— including money laundering, contraband, and product piracy— to radical Islamic groups in the Middle East (Hudson, 2003).

The TBA has one of the most important Arab communities in South America. An estimated 90 percent of the region is of Lebanese origin (Hudson, 2003). The cultural demographics make an ideal operations base for Arabic-speaking terrorist or criminal groups— a few extremists can form a small group, carry out a mission, and return with alibis backed up by many in the community. Sympathizers of al-Qaeda have allegedly been active in the TBA for these reasons (Hudson, 2003).

Along with Latin America, countries in southern Africa— including South Africa and Madagascar— have also been found to house terrorists. Recent evidence suggests that prominent al-Qaeda financiers, facilitators and recruits continue to operate in the generally underreported region of southern Africa. Looking at the history of current events reveals a discernable pattern that prominent global jihads have used this region as a possible medium through which to not only stage operations, but also secure refuge, money and recruits. This area falls into the support category of terrorist black holes. Southern Africa exemplifies one such region in which al-Qaeda might utilize the *terrorist comparative advantages* in order to remain viably intact and active. Al-Qaeda franchises are well placed across west, north, and east Africa, with signs that southern Africa may have been or is currently a key support base (Solomon, 2007). In January 2007, the suspicious death of a highly suspected al-Qaeda financier— in his gemstone mine— that was believed to be linked to a vast array of terrorist operatives, plots and front organizations across the globe confirmed law enforcement agencies' fears (Asharq al-Awsat, 2007). Jamal Khalifa reportedly funded Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, a mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, and his nephew Ramzi Yousseff to execute Operation Bojinka, a plot to destroy 12 transpacific airliners bound for the U.S. simultaneously. He is also credited with the financing of the Islamist militant Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines (Asharq al-Awsat, 2007). What is most disturbing is that an al-Qaeda operative of this profile maintained mining interests in Madagascar and elsewhere, which raises questions about al-Qaeda's ability to take advantage of ungoverned spaces in southern Africa and elsewhere for its financing activities (Solomon, 2007).

Coincidentally, less than a week after Khalifa's death, Fazul Mohammed, a Comoros-born al-Qaeda leader, had been seen in Majunga, a seaside town in northwest Madagascar (Solomon, 2007). Mohammad is believed to have directed the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (FBI, 2008). If this operative was able to find safe passage from Somalia to Madagascar or the Comoros Islands, it implies not only that there was an existing support infrastructure in place to facilitate his movements, but also that he could have easily been directing other operatives in Somalia while based in Madagascar or another African country (Solomon, 2007).

Along with Madagascar, South Africa has seen a recent rise in terrorist activity. In January 2007, the U.S. and United Nations moved to freeze the assets of South-African

based cousins Junaid and Farhad Dockrat for providing material and financial assistance to al-Qaeda (U.S. Treasury, 2007). The cousins show how jihadi hubs— individuals with extensive social networks within the movement— can become tentacles of support that facilitate the movement of human resources and capital to perpetuate the organization (Solomon, 2007). A current trend is that professionals— doctors, lawyers, engineers— tend to be involved in terrorist financing activities over their non-professional cohorts and often earn enough through legitimate means to fund terrorism. Junaid Dockrat, a dentist in South Africa, allegedly transferred \$120,000 to Hamza Rabia, the now deceased al-Qaeda foreign operations chief, in March and April 2004 to aid the movement of South Africans to al-Qaeda training camps in Pakistan (U.S. Treasury, 2007). Farhad Dockrat is a Pretoria-based cleric also involved in terrorist financing and other support activities. The U.S. Treasury traced an approximate \$62,900 donation given by Farhad to the Taliban ambassador in Pakistan to be forwarded to the al-Aktar Trust, an Afghanistan-based fundraiser for al-Qaeda (U.S. Treasury, 2007).

One pattern that has emerged is an apparent South African link to jihadi operatives, often of Pakistani descent, in the United Kingdom and Pakistan. Haroon Aswat, another known operative was detained in Zambia traveling from Zimbabwe in late July 2005 after his phone number was found on all four of London's 7 July 2005 suicide bombers' cell phones (Solomon, 2007). He reportedly exchanged over 20 phone calls with each of them while he was in South Africa the days prior to the attack (Daily Mail, 2005). This use of South Africa as a staging front and operations center places it firmly in the category of a *–battlefield–terrorist black hole*.

Perhaps the most unsettling case seen in the past few years is that of Abd al-Muhsin al-Libi, another al-Qaeda operative who emerged in South Africa in February 2004 when he was detained for holding a fake South African passport. This passport was determined to be a legitimate passport, not fake, indicating that it was obtained illegally through a South African government official (Solomon, 2007). This event shows another aspect to the terrorist network operating in *terrorist black holes*— government corruption by those loyal to the terrorist cause.

The TBA and southern Africa are unique in that they both exhibit traits of all four categories of *terrorist black holes* each being used as a *–battlefield–* and *–support–* black hole, as well as, each supporting a large Arab population that sympathizes with Islamic fundamentalist ideals.

Black Holes at Sea

Black holes are also present at sea. After the 9/11 attacks, security experts have repeatedly fallen back on a 200-year-old model to guide leaders when dealing with the threat of Islamist terrorism— the war on sea piracy. During the early years of the nineteenth century, Mediterranean pirates, sailing out of the ports of the Barbary states of northern Africa, would capture commerce ships and hold their crews for ransom (Luft and Korin, 2004). In response, the United States waged war against the pirates— incidentally this was the first successful war effort of any country against this foe. It should not come as a surprise that this was the model first employed by President Bush when declaring the War on Terror.

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Over the years, the concern surrounding sea piracy has faded to the point that security experts have failed to realize that the international community has all but forgotten the possible danger at sea. In truth, though piracy has never been completely controlled, the number of pirate attacks has tripled in the past decade⁶ putting piracy at its highest peak in modern history (Luft and Korin, 2004).

Commercial shipping companies and the oil and gas industries have long felt the impact of lawlessness at sea. As 71 percent (Museum of Science, Boston, 2008) of the planet's surface is covered in water and approximately 80 percent of the world's cargo is transported by sea, the ocean is a bastion for terrorist activity (Luft and Korin, 2004). Some areas are so prone to piracy that ships engage in preventative measures instead of relying on local maritime law enforcement. By international agreement, as of July 2004, ships above 500 tons must be equipped with alarm systems that silently transmit security alarms containing tracking information in case of emergency and vessels are also required to emboss their International Maritime Organization (IMO) number on their hulls (Luft and Korin, 2004). There have also been advances in the utilization of mini-robotic submarines to police shores of the U.S. against terrorist activities (College of William and Mary, 2003). Though these measures are in place, they fall far short of preventing sea piracy in areas which encompass the characteristics of terrorist black holes.

Terrorist organizations have discovered that disrupting oil supply distribution could have a devastating impact on the world's economy. Unfortunately, merchant fleets are forced to pass through certain strategic chokepoints, many of which are located in areas where terrorist groups with maritime capabilities are active. The Strait of Hormuz, connecting the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, is 50km wide at its narrowest point (Kjeilen, 2006). Roughly 15 million barrels of oil are shipped through it daily and it is the only sea route in which oil from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Qatar can be transported (Kjeilen, 2006). In the mid 1980s, when tankers were consistently attacked in the strait, shipping in the gulf dropped over 25 percent (Luft and Korin, 2004). Until recently, the threat of piracy in this area has been relatively benign, but the War on Terror has introduced the possibility of renewed threats to this region.

Another vulnerable passage⁷ and declared the number one piracy danger zone in the world in 2008 by the International Maritime Bureau (IMB)⁸ is the Gulf of Aden off the east coast of Somalia (ICC, 2008). This region has seen over a third of all reported piracy attacks in 2008⁹ comprising 63 incidences in total. The third quarter alone boasted a total of 26 vessels hijacked by Somali pirates with approximately 537 crew members taken hostage. A further 21 vessels were fired upon by Somali pirates in the same period. As of 30 Sep 2008, 12 vessels remain captive and under negotiation with over 250 crew being held hostage (ICC, 2008). IMB Director Captain Pottengal Mukundan stated,

The number of piracy attacks off the coast of Somalia is unprecedented. Pirates in the Gulf of Aden are growing increasingly brazen, attacking vessels, including tanker and large bulk carriers, with impunity. This major international seaway requires immediate increased protection and naval intervention (ICC, 2008).

Though the international community has recognized the problem of piracy around the world, it has been fighting to create governance in areas that have shown a distinct

lack of law enforcement for long periods of time. These two examples of dangerous shipping lanes play directly into the discourse of *terrorist black holes*. The most vulnerable areas at sea are those with little to no maritime law enforcement and have no direct government to control fleet usage.

Perhaps the best success seen in the past few years to combating piracy is the change seen in the formerly piracy riddled Strait of Malacca. In 2004, this area was deemed the most dangerous passage by the IMB the concern stemming from the fact that over two-thirds of the world's trade uses the passage on an annual basis (Luft and Korin, 2004). In the past two years, this area has seen less than five incidents total due mainly to an increase in security of the region (ICC, 2008). Counter terrorism agencies can use this example as a model to apply for future problem regions. Though the Gulf of Aden is being patrolled by a maritime law enforcement element the area is vastly larger than the Strait of Malacca, thus other tactics will need to be employed.

Conclusion

The importance of being able to recognize and locate *terrorist black holes* is essential for the progression of countering international terrorist activity. Identifying the unique characteristics present in these regions leads to greater understanding of how each area is being used. This information can lead experts to specific types of crime and even specific organizations.

By using the lessons learned from known black holes, agencies are armed with the tools needed to hinder organizational movement and to an extent dictate where they find sanctuary. As counter terrorist and law enforcement agencies begin to shut down the number of areas terrorist groups are able to flee to for safety, they will be able to break apart the organizations and deny them the ability to re-group/re-structure. Ultimately, terrorist cells will be hard pressed to continue their exploits without being dispersed by the international community.

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