

**Professor Bill Banks, Syracuse University**  
**Black Spots: Identifying Growth Areas for Terrorist Cells and How to Combat Them**  
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By Eric S. Morse

Ungoverned spaces, or "Black Spots," are an unusual national security issue unrecognized by many security analysts in the post-9/11 era. This era is characterized by the emergence of powerful non-state actors around the globe, of which black spots are their home bases. These areas have three general characteristics. First, there is an absence of government control. Second, there is the presence of an alternative "government" or power in the area. Third, these areas possess the ability to breed and export extremism.

Professor Banks and his Mapping Global Insecurity (MGI) team at Syracuse University<sup>1</sup> have already identified 140 potential black spots, and have developed 75 detailed case studies of areas in this group. They estimate that there could be 400-600 black spots worldwide, although future research is needed to develop a comprehensive global picture.

With such a large number of threats worldwide, a common question is why hasn't the U.S. intelligence community been working on identifying and analyzing these areas? Professor Banks argues that two issues have created a lack of accurate intelligence on present and emerging black spot phenomena. First, the traditional state-level of analysis employed by political scientists and the intelligence community is too "big picture" by nature, and fails to identify black spots with characteristics recognizable only at a local level of analysis. Second, the traditional failed state literature is also problematic because regional and transnational actors are present in black spots, but are unlikely to be identified with state-level analytical tools. In contrast, the MGI team is using a range of political, economic, sociological, and cultural methods to dig beneath the state-level veneer and study the local level of emerging conflict zones. By implementing local-level analytical tools, the research is able to provide a much more detailed picture of criminal and extremist activities emanating from suspected black spots and to supply an early warning or forecast of the potential threat from such areas.

The current crop of case studies suggest that areas with specific characteristics tend to develop into black spots. These characteristics include:

- Areas that are near a border.
- Areas with weak or no effective government.
- Areas that are near trade routes.
- Areas with high levels of government corruption.
- Areas that are unattended to by media sources.
- Areas that are inhabited by heterogeneous populations.

With these criteria, black spots are as diverse as areas such as the Afghan-Pakistan border, the southwestern United States near the Mexican border, areas located along the U.S.-Canada border, ungoverned spaces in Yemen and Somalia, and criminal hotspots in Naples, Italy. Many black

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<sup>1</sup> Global Black Spots Mapping Project: <http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/moynihan/gbs/Welcome/>

spots are yet to be identified, and more will continue to emerge and evolve. Without appropriate resources and attention dedicated to this local level phenomenon, the intelligence community may be missing security threats. At a time when the U.S. intelligence community says that analysts cannot study a clandestine thing like black spots, Bill Banks and the MGI team say that you can and you must.

For further information on black spots, read "[Mapping Global Instability](#)" by Bartosz Stanislowski in the [Fall 2010 National Strategy Forum Review](#). Dr. Stanislowski is a senior analysts on Bill Bank's team at Syracuse University.