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Mapping Global Insecurity

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Watching... and Seeing

Consider the following scenarios:

On March 17, 1992, and July 18, 1994, a non-state actor (Hezbollah) executed sophisticated, pre-planned attacks. Targets: the Israeli Embassy and Argentine-Israelite Mutual Association building, located in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Predominant planning and staging location: Ciudad del Este, a border city located at the epicenter of the so-called tri-border area of Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina.

On September 11, 2001, a non-state actor (Al Qaeda) executed a sophisticated, pre-planned, and highly coordinated series of attacks. Targets: symbolic locations within the U.S. mainland. Predominant planning and staging location: Afghanistan, with significant back-up and support centers in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. Until the present day, the FATA remains a jurisdictional nightmare and a hub of insurgent and terrorist activities.

On November 8, 2002, a non-state actor (a Somali group linked to Al Qaeda), executed sophisticated, pre-planned attacks. Targets: a Boeing 757 of the Arkia Israel Airlines during its takeoff from Mombasa's Moi International Airport was fired upon using surface-to-air missiles (SAM)) and, 20 minutes later, an Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel in Mombasa was hit by an SUV loaded with explosives. Predominant planning and staging locations: the Somali fishing village of Baraawe, which today has become one of "pirate capitals."

What do these three scenarios have in common? First, lethal attacks were executed effectively by non-state actors. Second, these actors took advantage of locations that de facto enabled them to prepare and execute their attacks without discovery; it is locations like these that facilitate today's non-state actors committing acts of crime. Without such places, their operational

capacity¹ would be severely limited. Third, it is important to note the differences between the three locales: each is different in terms of size—from fishing village to city to tribal area—and each is located in a different part of the world—Latin America, Central Asia, and Africa. And, fourth and perhaps most important, none of them is a state or even what we might term a “failed state.”

Knowing the locations of such places and understanding their internal and external dynamics provide us with information that is useful for at least three types of activities critical to national security: (1) identifying environments conducive to criminal and/or terrorist operations; (2) tracking and, as necessary, intercepting insecurity flows between such places (e.g., illicit assets, weapons, money, people); and (3) gathering actionable intelligence about emerging and impending security threats.

The places noted above in the scenarios are not accidental; indeed, according to our research, there are probably hundreds of them worldwide. Mapping them allows us to be one step ahead of the so-called “global bads”² involved in crime and terrorism—one of the key purposes of the Mapping Global Insecurity (MGI) Project³ located in the Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs and the Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism of Syracuse University’s Maxwell School. These “islands of insecurity” are not represented on geopolitical maps; such maps focus, instead, on nation-states. Because these places represent the geographical equivalent of astronomical “black holes,” we have called them “black spots.” Identifying and placing black spots on maps allows us to see the world through the eyes of criminals and terrorists—a very different map from the “state-to-state” view that we have been taught.

Definition

Black Spots are parts of the world that are (1) outside of effective governmental control; (2) controlled, instead, by alternative, mostly illicit, social structures; and (3) capable of the breeding and exportation of insecurity (e.g., illicit drugs, conventional weapons, terrorist operatives, illicit financial flows, strategic/sensitive know-how) to faraway locations. Similar to the notion of “black holes” in astronomy which are located mainly by analyzing anomalous gravity fields, black spots are also difficult to “see,” as they usually, or for extended periods of time, operate with a high degree of “international invisibility.” Some remain relatively invisible throughout their existence (for instance, the so-called “Leticia-Tabatinga Corridor” on the border of Colombia, Brazil, and Peru), while others’ visibility may be described as pulsing (for instance, the Chu Valley on the border of Kazakhstan and Kirgizstan, the Peruvian city of Encarnación, or the “Little Wahhabi Republic” in Russia’s Dagestan)—that is, becoming visible and then invisible across time. Such diversity in the permanence of black spots is one aspect used to classify them.

¹ J. Bowyer Bell. “Conditions Making for Success and Failure: Non-state and Illicit Actors.” *Trends in Organized Crime*. Fall 2000, Vol. 6, Number 1.

² Bartosz Stanislawski. “Transnational ‘Bads’ in the Globalized World – The Case of Transnational Organized Crime.” *Public Integrity*, Spring 2004, Vol. 6, Number 2.

³ <http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/moynihan/gbs/Welcome/>

Criminals and traffickers themselves have been known to use the term “black holes”⁴ for areas like the Akwesasne Mohawk Reservation,⁵ located on the border of New York State and Canada, or the Tohono O’Odham Reservation on the U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona, since people and assets entering them on one side of the border are virtually lost from law enforcement’s radar when they emerge on the other. “Information black holes,” as Charles King calls them,⁶ such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or Transnistria, may be out of sight, but they are certainly not out of the minds of Georgian and Russian officials. Although they remain in the shadows of the international system, these places are “conduits for trafficking in drugs, arms, and even people,” as Fred Kaplan has claimed for a long time.⁷

Contrary to state-level approaches, the MGI Project looks at sub-state and trans-border realities and emphasizes the importance of nuance in the analysis of potential or confirmed locations. The reasons for this approach are three-fold. First, by examining specific cultural, ethnographic, political, economic, geopolitical, and historical factors, it is possible to look under the surface of what is seemingly a benign environment. Second, the MGI Project is interested in avoiding the “one-size-fits-all” approach that has led to such generic terms as “ungoverned territories” or “failing states.” Such approaches can be dangerously misleading if taken at face-value because no place is completely ungoverned and no place has a power vacuum for long. Third, considering the black spot as a base or transit point, analysis allows us to detect and pinpoint potential insecurity flows, including people of interest (criminals or terrorists). Mapping and tracking such flows offers the possibility for forecasting where a specific insecurity flow may be heading and with what objective, providing us with the basis for early warning.

Black Spots as Islands and Transit Points for International Insecurity

The fact that territories not controlled by legitimate, recognized authorities can become hotbeds of transnational terrorism and crime is not a new observation, in spite of extensive debate on this issue in recent years.⁸ Historical examples are abundant, including the piracy that blossomed along vulnerable merchant shipping lanes and islands located away from effective law

⁴ Sarah Kershaw. “Drug Traffickers Find Haven in Shadows of Indian Country.” *NY Times*, February 19, 2006.

⁵ Ruth Jamieson. “Contested Jurisdiction Border Communities and Cross-Border Crime: The Case of the Akwesasne.” In *Global Organized Crime and International Security*, edited by Emilio C. Viano. Athenaeum Press: 1999.

⁶ King, Charles. (2001) “The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia’s Unrecognized States.” *World Politics* 53(4):524–552.

⁷ Fred Kaplan. *The Wizards of Armageddon*. Stanford University Press, 1999. Page 11.

⁸ For some of the discussions on the topic see: Wyler, Liana Sun. (2008) “Failing States: Evolving Security Threats and U.S. Policy.” CRS Report for Congress.; Patrick, Stewart. (2006) “Weak States and Global Threats: Fact or Fiction.” *The Washington Quarterly*. 29(2): 27-53.; Dempsey, Thomas. (2006) “Counterterrorism in African Failed States: Challenges and Potential Solutions.” Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College.; Eizenstat, Porter, and Weinstein. (2005) “Rebuilding Weak States.” *Foreign Affairs*. Jan/Feb., Vol. 84, Issue 1; pg.; 134.; Takeyh and Gvosdev. (2002) “Do Terrorist Networks Need a Home?” *The Washington Quarterly*. 25(3):. 97–108.

enforcement. Such islands also exist today; some of them are islands on the seas, while others are more metaphorical. Although located on land, the latter are characterized by remoteness from effective, recognized, and democratic rule. For example, Somali waters are often mentioned in the context of modern piracy and it has become a cliché that Somalia is a “failed state.” If it is a failed state, then, logically, such piracy is no longer a “Somali” problem, but more localized and requiring an in-depth understanding of reality at the village level. We, therefore, are interested in analyzing the nuanced micro-realities of specific regions, cities, and, when possible, even districts of cities.

Consider, for instance, two districts in Naples, Italy — called Scampia and Secondigliano — that have been on the international criminal radar for a while now, but are less well-known to the general international security community. Yet, it is the Naples-based organized crime syndicate, known as Camorra, located in these districts that sold weapons to ETA⁹ and opened its safe houses to as many as one thousand Al Qaeda operatives en route between North Africa and northern Europe.¹⁰ As this example demonstrates, a state-level analysis of Italy would not have been helpful in understanding the reality, dynamics, and informal governance of these two districts in Naples.

Similarly, it is one thing to be aware of the so-called “Balkan route” in general (used to smuggle and traffic drugs, weapons, and people), but it is another to be able to pinpoint, zoom-in, analyze in-depth, and regularly monitor some of its specific nodes (for instance, Sandzak in Kosovo, Novi Pazar in Serbia, or sections of the Van and Hakkari provinces of eastern Turkey). Knowing what is happening within and between such locations enables us to monitor and track exchanges of goods and services that may constitute the basis of international insecurity.

Based on notions coming out of political anthropology as proposed in the writings of David Kilcullen¹¹ and his observations and suggestions on “conflict ethnography,”¹² the U.S. military has become increasingly interested in knowledge about the situational environment (culture; languages; customs) in which they find themselves. As useful and necessary as these approaches are, to date they have been geared for the military once operations have begun. The MGI Project, instead, is geared toward providing data on the fertile conditions that may lead to or fuel a conflict before it becomes operational. After all, there is no military operation without logistical support, weapons, intelligence, or people participating in it. Similarly, there is no

⁹ See, for instance, the Congressional Research Service’s 2002 report “The Nexus Among Terrorists, Narcotics Traffickers, Weapons Proliferation, and Organized Crime Networks in Western Europe”; Available at: http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/pdf-files/WestEurope_NEXUS.pdf

¹⁰ Ron Chepesiuk. “Dangerous alliance: Terrorism and organized crime.” September 11, 2007. Globalpolitical.com. Retrieved from <http://www.globalpolitician.com/23435-crime>. See also: BBC News “Pakistani Al Qaeda Suspects Held in Italy.” January 31, 2003. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2712607.stm>

¹¹ David Kilcullen. *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

¹² David Kilcullen. (2007) “Religion and Insurgency.” *Small Wars Journal*; blog: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/05/print/religion-and-insurgency/>

organized crime without organization, preparation, and disciplined execution of a particular scheme. For terrorists, insurgents, and criminals to have such capabilities, they need niches in which particular social, economic, political, and cultural factors coincide in time and space and allow for the emergence of a crime-friendly environment. The places that are selected are those locations that shield these non-state actors and provide them with a cloak of invisibility.¹³ Knowing the locations of such environments and understanding them may help law enforcement and intelligence organizations make these areas more visible and enable them to react to these non-state actors in a subtle, smart, and discreet manner before a military operation becomes necessary.

The MGI Project is engaged in regular and focused scanning of areas that are potential breeding grounds for insecurity. Intelligence and law enforcement organizations are often limited by financial and human resources with regard to how much of the globe they can scan at a given moment in time. With two combat theaters (Iraq and Afghanistan) that presently absorb a majority of U.S. intelligence assets, there are few national intelligence capabilities left over for the rest of the world. Projects like the MGI can serve as an intelligence support activity by monitoring and analyzing those areas that may not yet be the focus of attention. Let us not forget that a smart enemy will want to attack us at a location and from a direction that we least expect and black spots are found on every continent.¹⁴

In Conclusion

It is not easy to pinpoint all locations through which criminals and terrorists may transit or from which they may operate. But it is possible to pinpoint those spaces that the so-called “global bads” may see as favorable operational environments. Such locations need to be catalogued and monitored on an ongoing basis instead of being studied only after a major security failure (e.g., as in the case of the FATA). The MGI Project has so far identified over 120 potential black spot locations, has completed analysis of 70 of them, and is expanding the number of such locations under regular monitoring (for more information, see <http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/moynihan/gbs/Welcome/>). The U.S. government should be encouraged to reach out to and to support university projects like MGI that are ongoing, systematic in their coverage of the world, and can serve to enhance intelligence. The question is not whether the United States is able to afford the inclusion of all of its potential resources into the national security effort, but, rather, can the United States in today’s global insecurity climate afford not to do so?

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¹³ J. Bowyer Bell. “Conditions Making for Success and Failure: Non-state and Illicit Actors.” *Trends in Organized Crime*. Fall 2000, Vol. 6, Number 1.

¹⁴ Bartosz H. Stanislawski, ed. “Para-States, Quasi-States, and Black Spots: Perhaps Not States, But Not ‘Ungoverned Territories’ Either.” *International Studies Review*, 10(2) June 2008.