

# *The* NATIONAL STRATEGY FORUM REVIEW

An Online National Security Journal Published by the National Strategy Forum

## **Global Black Spots: Threats from Governance without Governments**

*By Dr. Bartosz Hieronim Stanisławski*

On May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011, almost ten years after the infamous terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, U.S. Special Operations Forces conducted a raid killing Osama bin Laden—the leader and the brain of Al Qaeda. The operation was the result of a long and extensive intelligence and military kill/capture campaign in which close coordination between U.S. Armed Forces and intelligence organizations was critical. The raid was executed by the Navy SEAL Team 6—a top level counterterrorist unit trained specifically for these types of strikes. It was a perfect use of a proverbial scalpel, but zooming-in on the location where that scalpel was eventually applied had been anything but easy. It was a result of the long, tedious, and hard work of men and women serving in human and signals intelligence agencies in various institutions of the U.S. government.

The leader of Al Qaeda was killed in a Pakistani city of Abbottabad, home to almost one million residents, located only about 70 miles northeast of the capital city of Islamabad. Interestingly, Abbottabad is also what is sometimes referred to as the “Pakistani West Point”—a town with a military garrison and academy. The very location may offer some hints as to where we do or do not look for criminals or terrorists that attempt to avoid capture; intuitively, a large city like that, so close to the capital, and with significant military presence would not necessarily be on the top of the list of potential places to look for bin Laden. But, when one thinks of it, evasion may be one’s most lethal weapon and evasion is done by putting oneself into the shoes of one’s opponents. The “bin Ladens” of this world do that all the time and they know very well where law enforcement, intelligence, or military organizations are more or less likely to look for them. The sooner their locations can be pinpointed and the sooner they can be captured or killed, the better it is for the law-abiding citizens of the world and their overall safety. We cannot afford to rest on the laurels; it is critical to speed up the cycle of information gathering and analysis on potential and actual locations in which terrorists or criminals may find refuge. The Black Spots approach may be helpful in that process.

### **Black Spots Analysis as a Methodological Approach**

The recent operation to kill bin Laden demonstrates the differences between the applicability of the “failed states” approach and the “Black Spots” approach, which the Global Black Spots-Mapping Global Insecurity (GBS-MGI) Program has been developing. While the analysis of the

so-called “failed states” may offer an approximate assessment of where a particular state is heading in terms of its political, economic, or societal stability as a whole, this approach does not focus on places like the “Abbottabads” of this world. From that perspective, Pakistan, for instance, has in recent years been seen as a country that should keep international analysts alerted to the possibility of its collapse. But from the perspective of state power, Pakistan possesses very considerable military (including nuclear weapons) and intelligence (including the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence organization) resources. The “failed states” approach does not look at locations like Abbottabad,<sup>1</sup> but stops at the state-level of analysis.

The GBS-MGI approach,<sup>2</sup> on the other hand, does not stop at state-level analysis, but looks deeper into the state and analyzes specific provinces, cities, or even districts of cities that may be outside of effective governmental control. We analyze locations in terms of the presence of alternative social structures that control the particular area (e.g., warlords; crime organizations; insurgent groups; terrorist networks), and we assess those areas in terms of their active potential to produce and export insecurity (e.g., explosives; illicit drugs; terrorist operatives; sensitive know-how; instructions within terrorist networks, etc.) to faraway locations. Three characteristics constitute the critical elements of the definition of what we dub Black Spots:

- Being outside of effective governmental control.
- Domination by illicit organizations.
- Capability to produce and export insecurity.

Our analyses serve numerous functions. First, they offer a situational snapshot of a particular part of the world (that is as zoomed-in as it is possible using open source information/intelligence (OSINT)). Secondly, we trace the developments that have led to the present state of affairs and we try and delineate the future trajectory of the situation. Thirdly, we look at interactions (what we call “insecurity flows”) from, through, and to the area under analysis. We then analyze its connections to other identified Black Spots, which results in additions to our map of the global underworld.

GBS-MGI's work encompasses a rather wide spectrum of analyses often starting at a tactical level, through theater-level analysis, and leading all the way to the strategic regional or global outlook. Importantly, our research is not aimed at being historical in nature (although that is a part of almost any analytical endeavor), but it is forecast- and early warning-oriented. Since we estimate that there are as many as 600 Black Spots world-wide (some of them active, others dormant, still others pulsing), possessing knowledge about such locations and their global reach

---

<sup>1</sup> Whether Abbottabad should be considered a Black Spot or not may be a matter of discussion revolving around the questions of (1) whether Pakistani authorities knew about bin Laden's hideout; (2) whether some people within the Pakistani government knew, but acted as rogue elements; or (3) whether Abbottabad represented an area that was less under central governmental control than may be generally assumed. In any case, we do not claim here that this city is a Black Spot, but neither do we see any basis at this moment to exclude it from potentially having been one. The reason is that at the moment the role of the Pakistani government in bin Laden's hiding in Abbottabad, if any, is not fully clear.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed description of the methodology, see "[Mapping Global Insecurity](#)" by Bartosz Hieronim Stanislawski. *National Strategy Forum Review*: Fall 2010, Volume 19, Issue 4.

and interactions may offer insights into the ongoing and future activities of the illicit global underworld.

Global outlook is very important and therefore the GBS-MGI Program tracks and analyzes threatening processes that often circumnavigate the globe, in which cases analyses limited to particular regions would simply be insufficient. At the same time, GBS-MGI emphasizes the critical value of the nuances of each particular case. Thus, while observing and analyzing trends, we never lose attention to the context-specific detail, which is pivotal not only in the analytical part of our work, but also in policy recommendations.

### **Implications of the Recent Turmoil in North Africa and the Middle East**

Do major political events and transformations, such as the recent power shifts in Egypt and Tunisia, civil conflict in Libya, protests in Syria, or the unclear situation in the Gaza Strip affect the existence or emergence of Black Spots? They may. For instance, in areas close to protracted or low intensity conflicts, Black Spots may emerge or re-emerge as black market sites for weapons or other needed supplies for the warring factions. Reversely, a state that falls into turmoil may offer fertile conditions for the operations of various illicit actors, since the security controls in such a state become less centralized, less rigid, and more chaotic. For example, there have been reports that some of the border areas between Libya and Algeria have seen significant increase in illicit trafficking since the civil conflict in Libya began. The trafficking networks that have been operating there for a long time took advantage of the recent volatile security situation and increased their shipments of trucks, 4x4 vehicles and, allegedly, weapons. The concern is that some of these items may have been headed to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which raised red flags within the Algerian security apparatus in particular, and within the international security community in general. It is important to keep in mind that the nodes of underworld operations are connected and for that reason recent developments in Libya may affect not only the operations of AQIM, but also of the entire smuggling routes that stretch from the coasts of West African states (e.g. Liberia, Sierra Leone etc.) via the historical city of Timbuktu, Mali, all across the Sahel region of Africa, including its tentacles reaching into Algeria, Libya, or Egypt. Thus, it would not be surprising to see a re-emergence of some traditional Black Spots in the Sahel region of Africa due to the changing security and supply-and-demand conditions. Clearly, strong military presence of the Libyan army on the Algerian-Libyan border was not conducive to a large-scale cross-border trafficking, so once some of the troops were moved from the border areas towards Libya's cities, pressure on the trafficking networks was significantly decreased.

The power shift in Egypt did not seem to have any visible effect on the Black Spots that we have identified in that area. Partially this may be explained by the fact that the transition took place in a smooth and gradual manner. For instance, a Black Spot that we identified as operating in sections of the city of El Arish, which, due to its location, has been the main transfer site of goods transported to the Gaza Strip through the underground tunnels, did not change its operational tempo. It still is the main marketplace for products that are needed in the Gaza Strip including, according to some reports, weapons.

The situation in Syria has not, so far, allowed for an emergence of new Black Spots because the Syrian government remains in control of the situation and has used extremely heavy-handed approaches in dealing with the street protesters and opposition members. A better organized opposition might eventually acquire weapons through some of the Black Spots that have been identified in South-Eastern Turkey, but we have not seen any evidence of that process so far.

This short overview demonstrates the variety of Black Spots that the GBS-MGI Program has been identifying and analyzing: from those that pulsate depending on the supply-and-demand conditions to those that remain relatively permanent over time; from those that are trade-specific to those whose activities may encompass a wide variety of products and services. This variety clearly calls for a more systematic classification within a frame of Black Spots typology, which indeed has become one of the legs of our research and analytical activities.

Can GBS-MGI be helpful to U.S. security operations? Based on informal interactions with intelligence, military, and law enforcement officials, the answer is yes. Our approach is unique because of its unit of analysis and because of the outlook that we propose on the operations of the “global bads” (criminals, terrorists, etc.). Moreover, we tend to look at locations that may become hotbeds of some of the illicit activities before they actually do so. That may offer a significant insight into modus operandi of some of the criminal or terrorist organizations. One of the key challenges that we have been facing and working to resolve is how to make a program like the GBS-MGI that is based at an academic institution establish a consistent working relationship with a non-academic, governmental agency that may use some of the reports that we have been producing. One thing is for certain: in today’s world of diverse state and non-state threats, every source that may support better, more accurate, and timelier intelligence operations is worth incorporating into the overall national security effort.

## **Conclusion**

To give a more detailed overview of the types of locations that have been analyzed in the GBS-MGI Program, in what follows we present seven short case studies of various Black Spots (they are not equivalent of case reports prepared on regular basis by the GBS-MGI Program). These case studies were written by the GBS-MGI graduate research associates and they represent samples from North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, South-East Asia, South Asia, Europe, and North America:

- El Arish, Egypt
- Guinea Bissau
- The Wa State, Burma
- The Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Pakistan
- Mitrovica, Kosovo
- Scampia and Secondigliano, Italy
- Akwesasne Reserve, U.S.-Canada Border

It is very important to keep in mind that locations that have been identified as Black Spots are not areas whose inhabitants are inherently bad people that conspire to bring harm to others; these are areas in which political, economic, social, geographical, and, sometimes, cultural conditions

coincide allowing various forms of transnational organized crime and/or terrorists to operate in diverse ways. In most cases, the majority of the inhabitant populations of Black Spots have no choice but to live in the environment in which they find themselves. Sometimes it is sweetened by economic incentives that flow from illicit activities of the area; sometimes it is enforced by the threat of brutal violence. In most cases, it is a combination of both the stick and the carrot that are held in the hands of illicit organizations dominant in the particular area.

This sampling of Black Spot cases demonstrates their variety and related challenges to analysts attempting to locate and identify them. And precisely because of the fact that they are not “all the same,” their study and analysis requires analysts to be consistent in their monitoring, but also remaining flexible and keeping their analytical horizons open in terms of what they look at. While existing patterns need to be recognized and critical definitional elements must be confirmed, the detailed, nuanced, and context-specific information must not be lost in the process. In spite of the recent successes of the U.S. intelligence community, this is no time to rest on the laurels or we will again have to be “catching up” with the threats of the future. U.S. intelligence needs to get serious about studying Black Spots and integrating these concepts into the national security architecture on both strategic and tactical analytical and operational levels.

*Dr. Bartosz Hieronim Stanisławski directs the Mapping Global Insecurity-Global Black Spots Research Program, which is a joint endeavor of the Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs and the Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism (Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University). His work focuses on policy implications of threats posed by illicit, transnational non-state actors; the overlapping of law enforcement and military security matters; and transatlantic security cooperation. He can be reached at: [bstanisl@maxwell.syr.edu](mailto:bstanisl@maxwell.syr.edu).*