Research Brief

RAND PROJECT AIR FORCE

Ungoverned Territories

A Unique Front in the War on Terrorism

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Abstract

Ungoverned territories pose an increasingly urgent threat to U.S. and international security. This research brief describes a RAND Project AIR FORCE study of the factors that give rise to ungoverned territories and make some of them conducive to terrorists and insurgents. This analysis can help the United States and its friends and allies develop more effective strategies to mitigate the threats emanating from these remote territories.

Since the end of the Cold War, failed or failing states and ungoverned territories within otherwise viable states have become a more common phenomenon. These territories generate all manner of security problems, such as civil conflict and humanitarian crises, arms and drug smuggling, piracy, and refugee flows. The events of 9/11 demonstrated how terrorists can use sanctuaries in the most remote and hitherto ignored territories of the world to mount devastating attacks against the United States and its friends and allies.

Despite the increasing urgency of dealing with the threats emanating from ungoverned territories, the international community has not proven adept at developing effective responses. Although analysts and policymakers are aware that ungoverned territories contribute to larger security threats such as terrorism, the phenomenon has not been generally defined as a distinct problem that requires unique strategies and policies to address. A RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) study provides this perspective by examining the factors that give rise to ungoverned territories, identifying their salient characteristics, and distinguishing among different types of ungoverned territories. This analysis of ungoverned territories can help the United States and its friends and allies develop more effective strategies to mitigate the threats emanating from these remote territories.

Characteristics of Ungoverned Territories

Ungoverned territories are areas in which a state faces significant challenges in establishing control. They can be failed or failing states, poorly controlled land or maritime borders, or areas within otherwise viable states to which the central government's authority does not extend. Ungoverned territories can also extend to airspace. Many factors contribute to making a territory "ungovernable," but the PAF study identified four major variables: (1) the level of state penetration of society, (2) the extent to which the state has a monopoly on the use of force, (3) the extent to which the state controls its borders, and (4) whether the state is subject to external intervention by other states or outside forces. For greater precision, some of these complex variables are broken down into a number of indicators. For instance, state penetration of society can be measured in terms of the presence or absence of state institutions; the state of the physical infrastructure; the prevalence of the informal or gray economy; and social and cultural resistance to state penetration.

The Problem of Terrorist Sanctuaries

Ungoverned territories occur throughout the world, but not all such territories become terrorist sanctuaries. Beyond the natural tendency of terrorist groups to operate in their home areas, there are several factors that make a territory conducive to such groups. The PAF study measured a territory's conduciveness to a terrorist presence in terms of four additional variables: (1) access

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to infrastructure, (2) local financing, (3) a local population favorably disposed to the terrorists, and (4) invisibility, or those characteristics of the local environment that render terrorists hard to find by the authorities. Access to infrastructure is important because terrorists need communications facilities, banking systems, and a transportation network that provides access to urban centers and potential targets. Terrorists also need to generate income to fund their activities. Unless they can tap into external sources of income, such as remittances from sympathizers or diaspora communities, terrorists may need to trade or tax local commodities such as "conflict diamonds" or illegal drugs. But the most important factor in determining a territory's conduciveness to a terrorist presence is favorable social and demographic conditions that provide a base of support.

Types of Ungoverned Territories

The factors that make some territories ungoverned and potentially conducive to terrorist groups play out differently in each case, depending on the circumstances that gave rise to their present condition. Ungoverned territories may be grouped into three types:

- In territories with *contested governance*, local forces actively disputing government control seek to create their own state-like entity, either to realize aspirations of independence or to profit from illegal activities without state interference.
- In territories with *incomplete governance*, the state cannot maintain a competent, qualified presence that is stronger than competing power centers. Local officials, where they exist, are inept or are co-opted by criminal organizations.
- In territories with *abdicated governance*, the central government chooses not to provide public goods because it believes that nothing cost-effective can be done or because it has little affinity with the ethnic minorities that predominate in the territory.

Policy Implications

Understanding the causes of ungoverned territories and the factors that make them attractive to terrorist groups can illuminate which policy options are likely to be most effective in addressing the problem. Based on its analysis, PAF identified policy implications for the U.S. government, the Department of Defense (DoD), and the Air Force.

For the U.S. Government

The U.S. government should consider the following options to help friendly states strengthen their control of ungoverned territories:

- **Reevaluate the role of development assistance.** Such aid may help build infrastructure and institutions in places where a government has previously abdicated its responsibilities, but it is unlikely to be effective in territories with incomplete governance without more profound social and political changes.
- **Promote competent government practices.** Providing expert advice to officials on how to coordinate their actions across departments and minimize bureaucratic competition would be an important step in strengthening public sector capabilities.
- **Improve infrastructure.** Better transportation infrastructure, in particular, could have profound effects in ungoverned territories by improving the overall mobility within society.
- **Promote regional security architectures.** States that share similar concerns about the effects of ungoverned territories on their security could cooperate on initiatives to improve infrastructure and strengthen the central government's projection into these territories.
- **Mobilize regional organizations.** Emphasizing the role of regional organizations might prove beneficial, especially when trying to reduce incomplete or abdicated governance or resolve contested rule.
- **Address profound, official corruption directly.** The United States must ensure that its assistance efforts are not wasted by entrenched corruption and that it does not enable a corrupt regime to prolong its grasp on power. Policymakers must recognize that some regimes may not be salvageable.

The U.S. government should consider additional steps to help diminish terrorist groups' ability to operate in ungoverned territories:

- **Reduce terrorist exploitation of infrastructure.** The United States might provide training and assistance to local governments to improve their ability to detect and apprehend terrorists using public transportation. Modern monetary and banking systems with safeguards against money laundering and software for tracking financial transactions can help limit terrorists' ability to move funds.
- **Deny terrorists local sources of income.** The United States could help a government's efforts to suppress or reduce the criminal activities that fund terrorists. Counterdrug assistance in certain territories can also have a counterterrorism effect.
- **Prevent exploitation of assistance programs.** U.S. programs that help governments build capacity to produce public goods will eventually reduce terrorist exploitation of public health, education, and social welfare services.

- **Make invisibility more difficult to achieve.** The United States can help improve states' ability to control their borders, thus limiting terrorists' ability to move undetected. U.S. assistance in the form of intelligence-sharing and warnings could also be important.

For the Department of Defense

Given the pervasiveness of ungoverned territories throughout the world, DoD should consider treating this issue as a distinct category of security problems in the Strategic Planning Guidance. The three-part typology of ungoverned territories can provide an organizing principle as DoD reviews its capabilities to handle situations involving contested, incomplete, or abdicated governance.

DoD should include ungoverned territories in its security cooperation guidance. The department may find that dealing with ungoverned territory directly—rather than as a symptom of protracted violence, crime, and poverty—might prove useful. The training of foreign internal defense forces, highlighted as an important part of DoD's security cooperation strategy in the 2005 Quadrennial Defense Review, can play a major role in addressing the ungoverned territory problem.

For the Air Force

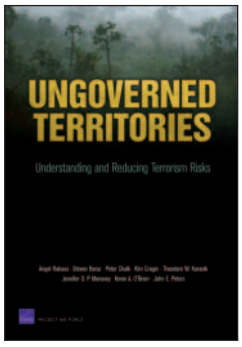
The Air Force faces operational challenges because of the need to operate from locations in or near ungoverned territories and Title 10 concerns over its requirements to train, equip, and organize forces suitable for the missions and tasks that ungoverned territories precipitate.

Operational issues. Most often, the Air Force will be called on to support a beleaguered, friendly government in its attempt to defend its rule in the face of opposition and to project its authority into an ungoverned territory. In such cases, the Air Force may be called on to operate from forward operating sites in government-controlled territory. When designing force packages for these sites, the Air Force must consider such factors as the facilities' vulnerability to attack, the quality of host-nation support, the presence of U.S. ground forces, and whether the Air Force will enjoy freedom of action.

Security cooperation issues. The Air Force provides guidance to optimize its security cooperation programs, which helps to facilitate transparency and to improve coordination among the Air Force component commands and major commands. Air Force Headquarters calls for program managers to leverage security cooperation efforts to the maximum practical extent to build partner capacities.

Title 10 issues. The greatest organizational challenge for the Air Force will be to ensure that it has enough high-demand units, such as the 6th Special Operations Squadron, to deal with the number of cases in which it will need to assist in territories with contested governance on operations that usually involve insurgencies. In terms of training, cultural sensitivity and language facility could become requirements for airmen working in training and advisory capacities with host nations. Equipping becomes an issue where ungoverned territory results from contested governance and the Air Force must help a beleaguered government develop infrastructure relatively quickly. Opening, operating, and sustaining airfields could be an important Air Force contribution.

Building government capacity and extending a central government's penetration into ungoverned territories is the work of generations. Nevertheless, if the United States works with its partners to achieve these goals, the overall results would help to make ungoverned territories less hospitable to terrorists. ■



This research brief describes work done for RAND Project AIR FORCE and documented in *Ungoverned Territories: Understanding and Reducing Terrorism Risks*, by Angel Rabasa, Steven Boraz, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, Theodore W. Karasik, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Kevin A. O'Brien, and John E. Peters, MG-561-AF (available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG561/), 2007, 396 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8330-4152-4. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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RB-233-AF (2007)

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