

The Misleading Problem of Failed States: a ‘socio-geography’ of terrorism in the post-9/11 era

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ABSTRACT *Contrary to a commonly held view, significant numbers of international terrorists do not come from failed states. Nor do failed states house many organisations that support terrorism. All states consistently fail some portions of their population. In fact, were we to generalise, it should only be along the following lines: from disenfranchised populations can come foot soldiers, from alienated populations can come terrorists. And these exist in pockets everywhere, including our own backyard. To the degree that these produce security problems, these problems are best handled by means other than direct military force.*

Failed states have been part of the debate over US foreign and national security policy since the end of the Cold War. Various defined as states where centralised governing authority is absent, or as ungoverned or ungovernable areas, failed states became a concern for the USA when it found itself involved in Somalia, Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. In these cases failed states presented humanitarian and security problems, undermining efforts to establish a more stable and prosperous international order. Debates about how to respond to these state failures frayed alliance relationships. In so far as security was an issue with failed states, discussions focused on destabilising refugee flows; the trafficking of drugs, guns and humans; the spread of disease; and the support and facilitation of terrorism. The connection between terrorism and failed states received new emphasis when Osama bin Laden took refuge in Afghanistan. Five years after the attacks of 11 September, a prevailing view holds that failed states support and facilitate terrorism.

The US government’s National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, for example, contends that terrorists exploit failed states, using them to ‘plan, organize, train and prepare for operations’.¹ Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has said of ‘weak and failing states’ that they ‘serve as global pathways that facilitate . . . the movement of criminals and terrorists’.² An assortment of civilian and military officials and experts outside the US government worry

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that Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, the Balkans, the Horn of Africa and certain areas of Latin America and West Africa are now or will become ungovernable areas where terrorists will recruit, plan and operate.³

Is this concern with failed states well founded? What exactly *is* the connection between ungoverned areas and terrorism? One thing is clear. International terrorists—individuals who travel from one country to another to commit acts of terrorism—do not appear to come predominantly or even significantly from failed states. Only one of the 11 September hijackers, for example, came from a state (Lebanon) that had failed. Foreign fighters in Iraq come mostly from Egypt, Syria, Sudan and Saudi Arabia (in that order). Of the 312 foreign fighters captured in Iraq between April and October 2005, only one hails from a failed state (Somalia) and three more from a state that has failed and may fail again (Lebanon). Mark Sageman's published information on al-Qaida operatives shows that most are from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, France, Algeria, Morocco and Indonesia (in that order). A separate, somewhat later count of al-Qaida operatives, based on open sources like Sageman's, found that only a small percentage come from failed states. According to *The 9–11 Commission Report*, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed has claimed that most of the people in al-Qaida camps were from Saudi Arabia and Yemen, neither a failed state, and only '10 percent were from elsewhere'. Finally, of the 759 prisoners that the Department of Defense acknowledged holding in Guantanamo Bay in May 2006, 34% come from failed states, if Afghanistan is included, but, if one removes Afghanistan from this list, only 1.4% come from failed, or arguably failed, states: Iraq (8), Somalia (1) and Chad (1).⁴

There are probably two principal reasons why failed states do not generate many international terrorists. First, although those who fight in failed states develop skills and tactics valuable to international terrorists (a point elaborated on below), those skills are in demand locally. Second, even if someone in a failed state wishes to operate as an international terrorist, it is unlikely that he would possess the credentials to pass easily through border controls, and such a person might well lack the sophistication to operate unnoticed in economically and technologically advanced societies. If international terrorists are looking for personnel, it would make more sense to recruit and then train those who are already acclimated to life in the developed societies that international terrorists want to operate in or attack, and who bear passports that do not arouse suspicion.

The mention of training suggests another way that failed states might be used by international terrorists. If Americans consider Afghanistan a failed state (because the Taliban never consolidated control), then, as the *9–11 Commission Report* makes clear, al-Qaida benefited from this by setting up camps there to vet potential terrorists, as well as train them. Nevertheless, not much evidence exists that other failed states are providing venues for terrorist training camps. For example, although arguing that ungoverned areas are vulnerable to use by international terrorists, US and allied forces operating in the Horn of Africa have found few if any al-Qaida personnel or camps. Concerned about the exploitation of failed states, academic analysts have

also arrived at the same conclusion.⁵ One reason for the absence of training camps may be that international terrorists have got and are getting on-the-job training in Afghanistan and Iraq. Another may be that such training camps are not all that important. Although the 9/11 attack benefited from having a base in Afghanistan, most of the operational activity connected with the attack took place outside Afghanistan. In fact, the attack could have been planned, prepared and carried out without having access to a safe haven such as Afghanistan, as subsequent attacks in London and Madrid demonstrate. Furthermore, the idea of a 'safe haven' in a failed state or ungoverned territory is a bit of an oxymoron. In chaos, not even terrorists are safe or, more to the point, in order to be safe to train and plan, terrorists would have to divert their already limited resources to provide their own security or pay protection money to others. Inevitably, trying to operate in a failed state would likewise involve them in local politics, thus distracting them from their international objectives.⁶ Finally, the infrastructure and logistical problems in failed states are significant disincentives for anyone seeking a reliable base for operations.

All these difficulties may explain why relatively few of the financial organisations that support international terrorism operate in failed states. A count in 2004 revealed that only 13% of the specially designated terrorist entities on the US Treasury Department's list operated in failed states. One analysis of the financial dealings of the Muslim Brotherhood, which argues that these dealings directly or indirectly support international terrorism, found that they take place in 13 different countries, none a failed state.⁷ Also, while it is true that terrorists have raised funds in some failed states (Sierra Leone, for example) the amounts raised are dwarfed by the sums raised by crime and drug trafficking in non-failed states.

Tactics, techniques, and procedures

Conclude as we might that the link is weak between failed states and *terrorists*, the same cannot be said for the connection between failed states and *terrorism*. Consider those states commonly identified as failed states. Here is where all sorts of low-cost tactics, techniques and procedures are not only practised, but perfected.

Low-cost terrorist tactics—like kidnappings and hostage-takings, hijackings and bombings—foster a sense of perennial insecurity. These represent methods that will always be available to non-state and anti-state actors and that, in turn, help terrorists or their supporters create no-go zones for authorities. Meanwhile, if practice makes perfect for professional militaries, the same must be said for terrorists. Worse, techniques can evolve. Consider how much more mercenary, but also sophisticated and strategic, kidnappings have become over time in a country like Colombia—a location where for decades the central government has been able to exert only fitful control. Or take Afghanistan throughout the 1980s. Youth from all over the Muslim world converged there to fight with or as *mujahidin* and received basic training in low-cost terrorist techniques. They likewise learned how

advantageous an atmosphere of perennial insecurity can be, something that is now being further ‘perfected’ in Iraq.⁸

Zones of chronic insecurity, as well as war zones, don’t just serve as training grounds for youth attracted to and predisposed to violence, but double as test beds for innovation. Suicide truck bombings were invented in Beirut in 1983. Inspired by this, Velupillai Prabhakaran, the leader of the Tamil Tigers took the notion of suicide bombing and adapted it in myriad ways. Not only did the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) engage in suicide assassination—something Al-Qaida then used to considerable effect in targeting Afghan warlord Ahmed Shah Massoud in September 2001—but Sri Lanka pioneered the development of suicide boats, the effects of which the US experienced in Yemen in 2000, with the attack on the *USS Cole*.⁹

Worse than the perfection of techniques, however, may be their dissemination. Whether al-Qaida was involved in teaching Somalis how to modify rocket propelled grenades in Mogadishu in 1991, as has been alleged, or whether this was a homegrown development almost doesn’t matter. Other lessons learned from ‘Blackhawk Down’ have been applied in Iraq, just as improvised explosive devices (IEDs) developed in Iraq have shown up in Afghanistan.

The dissemination of methods is especially easy these days thanks, in part, to a plethora of international and regional media outlets, to include the internet. Terrorists and potential terrorists no longer need to be directly linked to directly learn from one another, as was so often necessary throughout the 1970s.¹⁰ This means they no longer need to pretend that they are making common cause in order to learn new tradecraft. Instead, the media can make these connections for them. Worse, the news media in particular also supply a lot of free advice, in addition to acting as a source of new ideas, particularly given two fairly recent developments: the rise of terrorism ‘experts’ and the amplification of their ‘expertise’ via a burgeoning ‘punditocracy’.

Experts and pundits not only compete for airtime but, with 24/7 news outlets, there is plenty of airtime to fill. Commentators thus sell their expertise literally, as Fox News consultants or analysts for MSNBC and the like. By speculating about what terrorists might do next they also engage in one-upmanship. They identify vulnerabilities in the USA and abroad, as well as wonder aloud about why terrorists haven’t yet done X or Y. Such speculation is especially heightened in the wake of attacks and thwarted attacks, which means that those who claim to be most concerned about the effects of terrorism ironically may do as much if not more than any website to suggest improvements and not just spread ideas.

Hollywood and pulp fiction serve as two other sources of dissemination. As has been noted, in *Debt of Honor* Tom Clancy has a plane fly into the US Capitol, and Timothy McVeigh clearly used the *Turner Diaries* as inspiration, if not as a guide. Ironically, it was a book turned into a movie—*Three Days of the Condor*—that made clear just how useful fictive accounts can be. And although the US and other professional militaries might not use Rambo and other action figures as training aides, Liberian and Sierra Leonean insurgents

did.¹¹ Tellingly their audiences were youth on the very margins of society, at the very margins of the country, in locations where electricity is only intermittent at best. With nothing more than a generator or car battery, a television and video or DVD player, impressionable, disenfranchised and alienated young males were recruited and motivated by films whose scenes, no matter how foreign, would have struck them as far more real than they strike us since, given local convictions, larger-than-life, seemingly impossible powers *can* be acquired via sorcery, juju, and other traditional means.¹² In other words, what Americans dismiss, others find inspirational. Globalisation can work in unexpectedly mysterious ways.

Nor is it at all clear this will change given the media's role as an increasingly uncensorable messenger. Counterfactually we might well wonder: what if, during the heyday of PLO hijackings in the 1960s and early 1970s, the media had choked off rather than granted the hijackings so much publicity? What if the policy decision at the time had been to pressure owners of media in the USA to report only the bare minimum, thereby cutting off the terrorists' oxygen supply?¹³ Would the 1972 attack on the Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics have occurred? Or, had there been less extensive or no live coverage of that event, would the targets of 9/11 ever have been targeted?¹⁴

This is not to suggest that media be shut down, although pressure could be brought to bear on them to act more responsibly. Rather, it is to suggest two points. First, several of the freedoms Americans promote and protect (like the first and fourth amendments) grant terrorists ideal forums. Second, while there may be no putting the genie of propaganda by *publicised* deed back in the bottle, what might Americans be comparably short-sighted about today that will haunt us in the future?

Strength in failure

One error analysts may be making is to focus on forests of failure rather than trees. Despite catchy terms like 'the arc of instability', entire regions don't collapse; entire states never fail.¹⁵ Not everything falls apart, even when there is no government control. Some things actually get more robust.

If we consider Lebanon in the 1980s, Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Afghanistan both before the rise of the Taliban and immediately thereafter, and Somalia still, we might well agree that by lacking a central government or centralised source of authority, these countries could no longer control their own borders, let alone their own airspace. Therefore, these countries lacked all the hallmarks of being responsible states. However, this does not mean that there was rampant anarchy on the ground. To anyone on the outside life may have appeared chaotic, but the fact that local residents in Beirut, Mogadishu, Sarajevo, and Kabul knew exactly where they could safely venture, whose militia would protect them, and who would gun them down points to latent order within the chaos. Without question, there was rampant insecurity. But, even under the wildest conditions, locals were able to make sense of where, when and why they were insecure. Indeed, what often appears to be a

complete breakdown simply masks the emergence of a new social order: one that may not benefit most, but always benefits some.

Even in the most devastated circumstances there are elites. And elites, it must be recognised, remain extremely globalised and well connected. Elites in Africa's most dysfunctional capital cities, for example, are far more likely to be personally familiar with Paris, London, Brussels or even Beijing than are most members of America's middle class.¹⁶ Not only do many have children actually *in* the American or European middle class, complete with citizenship, but their sagacity in sending their children abroad demonstrates that not only are elites sophisticated, they are unusually well schooled when it comes to moving funds, goods, kith *and* kin.

This also holds for under-educated warlords, whose presence has often come to signify failed states. Individuals who command their own militias and paramilitaries routinely trade power for 'stuff' and 'stuff' for power. If they control a region with resources, they sell those resources—diamonds, timber, iron ore, scrap, gold, coca, you name it—in order to gain more stuff—guns, ammunition, drugs, food—by which to attract and retain supporters. They connect with Western and, increasingly, Asian, corporate interests.¹⁷ They also befriend or are befriended by family members of leading Western politicians. For instance, former French President Mitterand's son was said to have had business interests with warmongers in both Rwanda and Liberia, and Margaret Thatcher's son was implicated in the 2004 Wonga coup attempt.¹⁸

The rise of private military companies (PMCs) likewise proves how putative state failure can be, since what 'state failure' means wherever one sees PMCs is that someone, usually the head of state, has contracted with independent security forces in order to exert ever greater and more direct control over mining and other lucrative interests. Sierra Leone offers a now classic example of South African firms protecting diamond interests and thereby the presidency. If the President's writ didn't extend to all parts of the country, the presumption at the time was it didn't need to; protecting select resources, not his citizenry, was sufficient. This was a conscious policy decision, not a failure of state.

We also cannot forget that where insurgencies provoke chronic insecurity—usually at the edges and in the hinterlands of states—insurgents almost always have external support. At the same time the more benighted the area, the more failure itself attracts two broad types of external actors. On the one hand, there are those who typically profess neutrality. This category includes aid workers, UN representatives, employees of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and journalists. Invariably some among these wind up being unwittingly (or even willingly) 'used'. Either they help garner sympathy or, even more instrumentally, they pass messages and letters back and forth. The late Emma McCune (subject of Deborah Scroggins' book, *Emma's War*) exemplifies just how easily 'do-gooders' can be co-opted. She went to Sudan to help dispense aid, married a prominent southern rebel, and progressed over time from being an active sympathiser to an outright activist, but one with incomparable connections back in the UK.

As for the second category of actors who plug local players into much wider networks, these are arms dealers, smugglers, narco-traffickers, pilots and others out to make a cash profit from 'failure'. One clear way for terrorists to take advantage is to piggyback on either or both approaches. Because the business of 'aid' and relief on the one hand, and the business of resource extraction on the other, actually *benefits* from dysfunctional or corrupt central government, terrorists can beneficently offer aid themselves—which is the Hamas/Hezbollah model—or they can directly tap extractable resources in the form of diamonds, tanzanite, etc, as al-Qaida reportedly has done.¹⁹ In other words, Americans shouldn't ignore the fact that certain practices, institutions and structures grow stronger in the face of apparent failure, and it is to these strengths that shrewd terrorists will gravitate.

What and who?

Having said that entire states never fail, we should at least consider what can fail and who failure can affect. Clearly, governments can fail to protect or service regions. Alternatively, people in remote or more marginal locations can make themselves ungovernable. This is a potential tactic for political candidates and parties who either lose elections or are 'made' to lose by governments that seek to retain power for themselves.²⁰ A third possibility is one that we actually see in the USA, and in the Pacific Northwest in particular, where entire communities of citizens have taken themselves 'off the grid'. Americans who do not want to be governed by federal or state authorities purposely disconnect themselves—from power grids, from paying taxes, from getting driving licences, etc. What Randy Weaver attempted to do in a single homestead at Ruby Ridge, other individuals and groups have also done or are doing (eg the Montana Freemen, the 'Republic of Texas'). So long as authorities don't interfere with them, they remain peaceful.

But dangerous confrontations and nexuses can occur when groups (off the grid or not) feel besieged and unjustly targeted, as the USA saw with the federal assault on David Koresh's Branch Davidians in Waco, TX which incensed Timothy McVeigh, perpetrator of the Oklahoma City terrorist bombing. Perceived or real neglect (and not just betrayal) by government can predispose disaffected sectors of society to embrace alternative ideologies, like the Christian Identity movement.²¹ Or it can make for a volatile mix between religion and individual responses to global events, as seemed to be the case for John Allen Muhammad, the Beltway sniper, and Sgt Hasan Karim Akbar who lobbed grenades into a tent in Camp Pennsylvania (Kuwait) in 2003.

In addition to governments neglecting certain sectors of society, they may *purposely* marginalise members of particular ethnic, linguistic or religious groups. Copts have felt the sting recently in Egypt. The LTTE initially organised in order to counter the pro-Sinhalese policies of the Sri Lankan government. In the mid-1980s Pro-Khalistani Sikhs in (and out of) India sought autonomy because they felt the Indian government was no longer providing them adequate protection or justice. The list goes on.

Perhaps the surest link between state failure and terrorism, however, is to be found where governments cannot or will not protect political moderates. When and where political moderates *lose* protection (implying, of course that they had some protection to lose), we should expect to see acts of anti-government violence mount. The reasons are simple. Extremism begets extremism, and with no moderates able to meet in the middle, violence not only escalates because it is extremists' medium of choice, but the cycle of repression, opposition and ruthlessness invariably includes acts designed *in order to* terrorise and cow.

Meanwhile, two equally obvious points: disenfranchised populations in states that have not failed represent recruitable pools of foot soldiers. The disenfranchised include those who have been chronically neglected and those who live in what have long been regarded as marginal zones; they are the *lumpen* classes or, as is the case in many countries, they are the *lumpen* peoples. In contrast, alienated populations include those who feel they have been actively acted against, but perhaps only recently; they are people who feel wilfully denied. This would then include many Palestinians, as well as the fairly affluent, but individually discriminated against (and religiously disrespected) 9/11 hijackers.²²

Where: socio-geography

For a whole set of obvious reasons, partial failure matters. When there is chronic insecurity confined even just to certain regions of a country, this can all too easily suggest that the government lacks overall control. Over time it can, in turn, prove corrosive to the government's ability to maintain control at all. It should not be considered a coincidence that civil war in Somalia's north preceded dissolution in the south.

Lack of control also points to an overall lack of centralised situational awareness. This, too, can call into question a government's worth in the eyes of citizens. More concretely, in areas the government does not monitor, either because it can't afford to—it may be too strapped for cash or, as in the tribal zones of Yemen, this might not be politic—terrorists *can* find a safe haven and material support. Or, as has been the case recently in West Africa, terrorists may simply take advantage of knowing no one is going to do anything about their presence so long as they only seek to rest, recreate and fundraise.

Here we need to distinguish between areas of a country that a government has the ability to penetrate, should it choose to, but where, for whatever reason, it neglects to do so, and areas that it simply cannot penetrate at all. Some places are geographically inaccessible. This may be a consequence of rugged terrain and/or a lack of developed infrastructure: insufficient roads, few bridges, unnavigable rivers, etc. One such place, for instance, is the Pankisi Gorge. But here we also have to be careful. Often our urbane mindset leads us to believe that areas are *geographically* inaccessible because they seem remote and forbidding to us. But just because such places may strike us as too hot, rugged, or godforsaken does not mean locals don't frequent them

and aren't intimately familiar with them. Time, distance and other dimensions that prove to be obstacles for university-educated, city-bred civil servants never hamper indigenous people in nearly the same way, and certainly never to the same degree.

Much more problematic is that some places are *ethnically* inaccessible. This describes virtually all underdeveloped tribal areas, whether in India or the Amazon, and throughout Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and beyond. Without some entrée into the community, outsiders are automatically considered suspect. Ethnic inaccessibility is compounded when the community is remotely located or difficult to get to and/or when groups have been treated as though they deserve to be marginalised. One price of neglect is that there are then few locals to assist as interlocutors or to act as cross-cultural brokers. Not surprisingly ethnic inaccessibility often tends to correlate with a history of bad blood and hostile relations. Power differentials matter. So do attitudes. For instance, mountain communities are notoriously difficult to 'penetrate' or control, as the Russians periodically relearn in Chechnya, the North and South Vietnamese discovered with the Montagnards, or federal authorities were reminded by Eric Rudolph, who eluded them in the Appalachians for over five years.

Rebel-held areas represent another kind of inaccessibility. Probably the most glaring case of a government having openly surrendered control is in Colombia, which has simply ceded large swathes of territory to the FARC. But there are areas of a number of countries which, off-limits to their own governments, then become difficult for government forces to penetrate, like Waziristan along the Pakistani–Afghan border.

Other socio-geographic challenges have to do with coastlines and borders. Few countries in the developing world patrol their inshore waters, let alone their coastlines. They either lack the means and/or those who are responsible for maintaining surveillance are easily bribed to look the other way. In addition there are few incentives for poorly paid members of Third World security services to spend time in unpleasant environments, like coastal mangrove swamps. Officers, especially, are disinclined to be uncomfortable. Remote border regions are little different, since what few towns there might be typically lack amenities and are considered hardship postings at best.

In much of the world unmarked borders bisect regions that are considered marginal by governments on all sides. One reason they are considered marginal has to do with being so far from 'civilisation'. But also, borders in much of Africa, Asia and the Middle East split ethnic groups. Not only does this make smuggling easy but, where smuggling occurs, authorities are rarely welcome. Here, too, ethnic inaccessibility compounds government's problems.

In fact, the more sets of inaccessibilities that overlap, the likelier it is that such areas will attract terrorists. This is one reason so many people assume Osama bin Laden must still be somewhere along the Pakistani–Afghan border, where rugged terrain, ethnic inaccessibility, ethnic straddling, a long history of smuggling, hostility toward authorities (and outsiders in general) converge and create not just *the* ideal hiding place, but conditions for the perfect kind of shell game (a gambling game which is really a fraud). Of

course, the only way to recognise these layers as protective layers is to already have deep local knowledge. Or for someone in the organisation to have access to those with deep local knowledge. This is where the West tends to be at a double disadvantage: Westerners seldom look at the world the way non-Western locals do, and thus seldom know where or how to look for what terrorists might be up to.

Hiding versus being hidden

Typically, when Americans need to hide, we seek protection either from family and close friends, or we cloak ourselves in anonymity. Typically switching identities is safer than falling back on social relations whom authorities can identify and trace.²³ Indeed, if Americans think about well known fugitives who have remained at large for years, they usually use the very same methods employed by the Witness Protection Program. Anonymity, and hiding in plain sight, also explains how the 9/11 hijackers went largely unnoticed.

At the same time, the USA also has a long and glorified history of outlaws hiding out in canyons, caves, mine shafts and other out-of-the-way sites. Tunnels have surfaced recently as a tool for those running drugs and illegal immigrants across the Mexico–US border. But underground railways are nothing new, and ‘underground’ itself became synonymous with terrorism in the USA in the 1970s.

While at first glance it might seem that these two methods of concealment are diametrically opposed—either hiding without other people knowing you are there or hiding without people knowing who you are—both work better in the West than outside it, as Saddam Hussein’s capture should demonstrate.

It is very difficult in the non-Western world to remain anonymous for long, even in a big city. Your relatives will track you down. Or your neighbours will want to know where you come from, who you are related to, and what networks you plug into. This is, in part, a function of how connected cities still are to villages. It also reflects how extensive families are and how important communal ties remain. But it likewise has much to do with how life is lived. Take the wealthy, for instance. They might well live in neighbourhoods where compound walls shelter them from the prying eyes of neighbours. But being rich means there are servants, including night watchmen: so much for secrecy and anonymity. Even in the middle of the night, watchmen can’t help but monitor the comings and goings of visitors as well as of family members. On the other hand, in the kinds of neighbourhoods where watchmen and servants themselves live there is absolutely no privacy, and thus no anonymity. Either way, in much of the non-Western world it is virtually impossible to conduct truly secret business.

The implications of this are profound since, without the cover of anonymity, terrorists must be protected in other ways. If they can’t hide on their own, they must *be* hidden. This may be done explicitly, or it may be inadvertent.

Terrorists may well have friends in high places. Members of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), for instance, actively supported the Taliban before 2002, and in doing so assisted al-Qaeda.²⁴ Some suspect such connections still afford the Taliban and al-Qaeda considerable protection. Why individual ISI agents would do this may be as much a matter of loyalty to religion, kin and/or tribe as of sympathy—which brings us to another significant difference between the West and the non-West. In certain societies, protecting others is obligatory and the honour of entire families, or lineages, may depend on ensuring someone's safety—even if that someone has committed a crime. Under such rubrics, too, once protection has been promised it can't be withdrawn. In fact, men will lay down their lives in order to maintain familial, never mind individual honour. It is not a coincidence that this is especially true for peoples along the Afghan–Pakistani border. It also holds for Chechens. To a lesser extent it applies among many Bedouin groups as well. But that it is perhaps most attenuated in exactly the region where the USA has offered astronomical sums of money for information about Osama bin Laden indicates just how little we appreciate what motivates others.

No matter how alien it may seem to us, there *are* societies in which individuals sacrifice their own interests for the sake of group honour. On the other hand, there are also societies to which individuals are made to feel bound *by* honour. Most mafias use honour as mystique. Although family connections may tie some members together, mafias are predominately predicated on shared business interests. This means money can act as a solvent and does not necessarily buy extensive protection. For instance, although it would *seem* that members of mafias have a vested interest in protecting one another, non-members will not be protected to the same degree. This is in sharp contrast to what *pashtunwali* (the Pashtun code of hospitality, honour and protection) offers, or what Chechen honour guarantees.

Another contrast is that there are very few places outside the West where it is possible for people to remain hidden *and* self-sufficient. This is because very few places are uninhabited or unfrequented. Even in the least hospitable desert, so long as there is a water source within several days' journey, nomads will occasionally pass through. They may be tending herds or they might be traders and smugglers. Regardless, their interest lies in knowing who else is around. Perhaps the most dramatic example of no place being too remote from prying eyes was Kargil in 1999, when shepherds spotted Pakistanis who were attempting to surprise Indian forces by climbing above them, to elevations of 16 000 feet.²⁵

The bottom line is that, throughout much of the world, and especially in areas with no sustained government presence, terrorists can only successfully hide or train if they secure local support and/or local silence. Terrorists in such locales need to be able to count either on communal ties and codes of honour and/or on sympathetic elements within the security services. At the same time, relying on others has to be predicated on something more than money. This is a critical yet under-recognised fact. The proof: anyone purchasing protection or silence *can* eventually be outbid.

This, in turn, implies that we should be able to do a much better job of gauging how much, and where, state failure *should* worry us. Islamists bent on *jihād*, for instance, would do best to seek communities in which they can count not just on protection, but on links that already hook them into regional or international movements, and back to locals. Religious brotherhoods do exactly this. Because terrorists also need a modicum of stability, they wouldn't set themselves up in a collapsed state where they potentially become a bargaining chip between local factions. Better to choose somewhere relatively calm and the kind of community that no authority would have the inclination, time or wherewithal to monitor.

Or, to turn this around, authorities who are concerned with terrorism would do well to pay particular attention to groups operating in marginal zones, among marginal populations, and in neglected or marginalised communities. Insurgencies often gather momentum in such communities and among populations that lack government services or attention, to include prisons. What sorts of local NGOs are operating in refugee camps, for instance? Who is trying to 'do good' in benighted areas, and who are *they* attached to?

Conclusion

For all the attention paid to terrorists' requirement for decent infrastructure to support their logistical and communications needs, too little attention is paid to their socio-geographic cover. No network analysis, for instance, can convey how honour will compel individuals to act, and who can thereby be considered complicit of either consciously or unwittingly doing favours for others.²⁶

Equally critical to take into account is who and what governments abroad can and can't monitor. To illustrate this, let us hypothetically compare Mauritania and Kenya. Mauritania is worth considering, because one of Osama bin Laden's top lieutenants was Mauritanian; Mauritania is one of only three Islamic Republics worldwide; before the 2005 coup Mauritania's government was under increasing domestic pressure to scale back its pro-US leanings; and there is an age-old affinity in Mauritania for a stricter Islam. Not only are most Mauritanians Muslim, but 'White Moors', who dominate the north—and the government—consider themselves to be Arab, and describe the Arabic they speak as the purest in the world. Given all this, it would be hard not to conclude that Mauritania is exactly the kind of place where we might expect *jihādists* to train, plot and retreat to. Sudan, on the other side of the continent, with a somewhat similar profile, served just such a purpose throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. In addition, like Sudan, Mauritania is sparsely populated, has long porous borders, and one of the longest (least patrolled) coastlines in Africa.

But, almost counter-intuitively and in what might seem an odd convergence of interests, the populations most prone to Islamism and therefore most likely to concern us are exactly those of interest to the Mauritanian government. This is because, to guarantee its own survival, the regime needs

to keep close tabs on who is meeting with whom in order to detect networks of dissent, which in turn means paying particular attention to both local networks *and* external influences, to include religious influences. In fact, there would be very little that the government would not want to be aware of in terms of inter-Moor politics—exactly the politics that would be hardest for us, as outsiders, to penetrate.

In contrast to Mauritania, Kenya has already been both the site, and victim, of *jihadist* terrorism. *Ergo*, it too should concern us. The catch in Kenya, however, is that few of its Muslim communities are related to one another either ethnically or spatially. Nor are any considered to be politically significant.²⁷ Consequently, they have never been well represented in government, which, in turn, means government has very few points of entry. More significant still, the fact that these communities have long been treated as marginal to the political process *and* marginal to the development of the country renders them precisely the kinds of communities in which terrorists should be able to find support. Worse, at this late date, the government cannot possibly play catch-up and penetrate them surreptitiously—no matter how much it might now try. Thus, if the Mauritanian government has the ability to know what is going on in its most radical Islamist populations thanks to its own make up, we can say that the Kenyan government does not. Granted, this does not take into account how authoritarian either government may be, how extensive its internal security apparatus is, etc. But here, too, we can make some general observations. For instance, the tribal nature of the government in Mauritania means that those in power are likelier to need a more extensive internal security apparatus. Kenya's demographics, and its recent political transformation to a more open democracy, militate against this.

It is for reasons like these that whatever programmes the US government undertakes as it aims to bolster counter-terrorism efforts abroad must be predicated on taking local realities into greater account. Ongoing efforts in the Sahel underscore this. It would be far better for the USA to encourage investment in ties to those who are *already* monitoring the uncontrollably large spaces that comprise the Sahel, rather than train special units of soldiers. Not only are local nomads already adept at determining who is local, who is not, what people are up to, etc but, unlike soldiers, they don't need to be taught to track or to do anything else they already do on a routine basis in order to ensure that their property remains safe. Like truck drivers, local merchants and anyone with whom potential terrorists would have to have some dealings, however, nomads will only assist their own governments (never mind the USA) if they feel those governments do more for them than those identified as terrorists will do. From this it should follow that, if the governments of Mauritania, Chad, Niger and Mali are governments the US wants to support, it should want them to be supported by their own populations in *all* corners of these countries, which means that *that* is where our investment should be going: into helping these governments secure the goodwill of local populations. Local populations are the best defence against terrorists operating in their midst. They are, in fact, the only real defence.

Indeed, the sooner policy makers and others recognise the socio-geographic nature of this problem, the sooner they can hone in on precisely the kinds of failure that matter most—which is *not* failure in terms of entire states. *All* states consistently fail some portions of their population. This is the truism policy makers and analysts need to both refine and redress. If we want to generalise, then it should only be along the following lines: from disenfranchised populations can come foot soldiers, from alienated populations can come terrorists. And these exist in pockets everywhere, including in our own backyard.

Notes

- 1 *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, September 2006, p 16.
- 2 Condoleezza Rice, 'The promise of democratic peace: why promoting freedom is the only realistic path to security', *Washington Post*, 11 December 2005, B7.
- 3 Douglas Farah, 'Salafists, China and West Africa's growing anarchy', International Assessment and Strategy Center, at <http://strategycenter.net/research/pubID.55>, accessed 20 January 2006; Yochi J Dreazen & Philip Shishkin, 'Mideast peril—growing concern: terrorist havens in "failed states"; instability in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon raise risk that US seeks to address; a province's "execution unit"', *Wall Street Journal*, 13 September 2006, A1; Rade Maroevic & Daniel Williams, 'Terrorist cells find foothold in Balkans', *Washington Post*, 1 December 2005, p 16; Ralph Peters, 'Error's new homeland', *New York Post*, 31 May 2006; and Robert I Rotberg (ed), *Battling Terrorism in the Horn of Africa*, Washington, DC: World Peace Foundation and Brookings Institution Press, 2005, pp 1–22.
- 4 Dexter Filkins, 'Foreign fighters captured in Iraq come from 27, mostly Arab, lands', *New York Times*, 21 October 2005, A8; Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004; *Terrorism to 2015*, Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 2004; *The 9–11 Commission Report*, New York: WW Norton, nd, p 232; and 'List of individuals detained by the Department of Defense at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba from January 2002 through May 15, 2006', at www.defenselink.mil/pubs/FOI/detainees/detaineesfoiarelease15may2006.pdf, accessed 17 May 2006.
- 5 James Brandon, 'To fight al Qaeda, US troops in Africa build schools instead', *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 January 2006, p 1; Rotberg, *Battling Terrorism in the Horn of Africa*, pp 2, 45; and Stewart Patrick, 'Weak states and global threats: fact or fiction?', *Washington Quarterly*, 29, 2006, pp 27–53.
- 6 For an example of this, see *The 9–11 Commission Report*, pp 250–252.
- 7 *Terrorism to 2015*; and Douglas Farah, 'The little explored offshore empire of the International Muslim Brotherhood', *International Assessment and Strategy Center*, 18 April 2006, at www.strategycenter.net, accessed 5 June 2006.
- 8 A point also made by Daniel Byman & Kenneth Pollack, 'By any other name: the specter of civil war looms over Iraq', *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, p 21.
- 9 See, for instance, Robert Connor, 'Defeating the modern asymmetric threat', Masters thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2002.
- 10 For changes over time, see Walter Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism*, Little, Brown, 1987; and Walter Laqueur, *The New Terrorism*, New York: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2001.
- 11 See Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth & Resources in Sierra Leone*, Oxford: James Currey, 1996.
- 12 This was made especially clear to Simons in Freetown, Sierra Leone (September 2005), when a number of Sierra Leonean adults, watching scenes from a Spiderman movie, found the sheer size of New York City more mind boggling and less credible than a human with spiderlike powers.
- 13 This is not as far-fetched as it might sound. Not only were there fewer media outlets in 1972, but owners still tended to belong to the same establishment as those making US foreign policy.
- 14 The documentary film, *One Day in September*, graphically illustrates just how crude both terrorist and counter-terrorist techniques were 30-plus years ago compared with operations today—and vividly demonstrates the extent to which both have evolved significantly over time.
- 15 See, for instance, Tom Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-first Century*, New York: Putnam Adult, 2004; and Tony Zinni, *The Battle for Peace: A Frontline Vision of America's Power and Purpose*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006.
- 16 This and other comments draw on the authors' experiences and observations in Africa and elsewhere over the past 20-plus years.
- 17 See, for instance, William Powers, *Blue Clay People: Seasons on Africa's Fragile Edge*, London: Bloomsbury, 2005.

- 18 Romeo Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*, Random House Canada, 2003, p 450; and Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*, New York: New York University Press, 1999, pp 152, 165. See also Adam Roberts, *The Wonga Coup: Guns, Thugs and a Ruthless Determination to Create Mayhem in an Oil-Rich Corner of Africa*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2006.
- 19 On tanzanite, see Glenn Simpson & Robert Block, 'Diary offers more on tanzanite, Al Qaeda link', *Wall Street Journal*, 24 January 2002, B1.
- 20 For instance, consider the following headline and subheadline: 'The court v the street: Felipe Calderon moves a step closer to the presidency but his opponent threatens to make Mexico ungovernable', *The Economist*, 2 September 2006, p 35.
- 21 See, in particular, Joel Dyer, *Harvest of Rage: Why Oklahoma City is only the Beginning*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997.
- 22 Terry McDermott, *Perfect Soldiers*, New York: HarperCollins, 2005.
- 23 For more, see Steve Marks, Tom Meer & Matthew Nilsen, 'Manhunting: a methodology for finding persons of national interest', Masters thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2005.
- 24 A point made early on by Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000; and more recently by Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, London: Penguin, 2004.
- 25 Owen Bennett Jones, *Pakistan: Eye of the Storm*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002, p 91.
- 26 For more, see Anna Simons, 'Culture and deception', mimeo, August 2003.
- 27 A point reiterated recently in 'Heading for the beach: the state of Islam on Kenya's Swahili coast', *The Economist*, 30 September 2006, p 58.