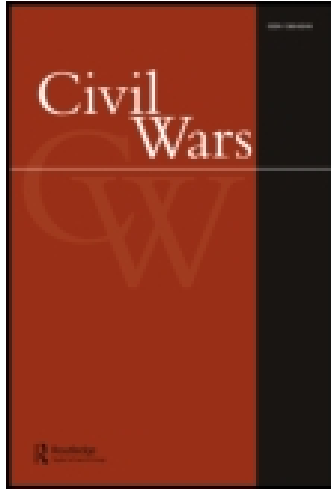


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# Black Holes: On Terrorist Sanctuaries and Governmental Weakness

REM KORTEWEG

*The 9/11 attacks demonstrated the strategic importance of terrorist sanctuaries. Aside from sanctuaries provided by host-states, ungoverned areas around the world are exploited by terrorist organizations resulting in terrorist black holes. This article explores the synergy between ungoverned areas and terrorist groups. State failure is not sufficient to explain the creation of these black holes, specific comparative advantages of an area to attract terrorist groups must be taken into account. Seven elements of comparative advantage are introduced of which lack of governmental control is salient. Finally, the possibility of terrorist black holes existing in the West is assessed.*

What do Blackbeard and bin Laden have in common, besides both constituting a significant non-state threat in their day and age and a remarkable resemblance in facial hair? Both have relied on sanctuaries for supporting their operations. While one sought refuge among the ungoverned coves and bays along the sparsely populated coast of several Caribbean islands, the other has sought refuge in the tribal areas along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. The use of sanctuaries is a critical element to the strategic operations of a non-state militant actor. With transnational terrorism currently perceived as a significant security threat, this article ventures into its relation to ungoverned areas and examines the phenomenon of terrorist sanctuaries.

## TWO TYPES OF SANCTUARY

Terrorist sanctuaries are areas in which non-state militant organizations are able to undertake activities in support of terrorist operations. There are two categories of terrorist sanctuaries. The first group is formed by areas where the government functions as a host-nation, so-called *host-state sanctuaries*. Either the terrorist organization is knowingly present in the country and tolerated, perhaps even supported, or governments create terrorist proxies and offer them bases within the confines of the state.

Examples are Sudan at the beginning of the 1990s which hosted Osama bin Laden and a few hundred militants, and Afghanistan during the Taliban rule where Al-Qaeda found a sanctuary during the latter half of the decade. Another is Libya during the 1980s when its leader Muammar Gaddafi provided the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) a headquarters in Tripoli.

The second variant of sanctuaries – and the focus of this article – is an area in which terrorist groups can undertake activities in support of terrorism without government knowledge or despite activities by the central government to undermine them. This second variant is mostly found within states that are considered ‘subject to failure’. These areas are specified as *terrorist black holes*. As large as an entire country or as small as a coastal border area, terrorist black holes are created through the exploitation of *ungoverned areas* by terrorist groups.

Terrorist black holes are the product of the proliferation of lawlessness and instability in the international system and the fragility of the nation-state. The underlying thought is that the environments created in particular states with weak governance capabilities are conducive to the activities of various terrorist groups and explain why a terrorist presence is observed there. This article does not portend to explain the phenomenon of terrorism, nor is it meant as a full-spectrum qualification of the appearance of terrorist organizations in all their forms. Instead, it presents a lens with which to focus on the confluence of state failure and terrorism.

#### BLACK HOLES IN POLICY

In 2002 the Pentagon’s Quadrennial Defense Review stated that ‘America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones. We are menaced less by fleets and armies than by catastrophic technologies in the hands of the embittered few.’ In the subsequent report four years later it noted that the new security environment had necessitated a shift from ‘conducting war against nations – to conducting war in countries we are not at war with (safe havens)’.<sup>1</sup> While the accuracy of the term ‘war’ in this context is debatable, the prevalent underlying observation is that, although the presence of strong states and the rise of potential peer competitors dominated the security landscape throughout the past decades, the role of weak states within the international fabric has refocused the attention of policy-makers and students of international security alike.

An increased focus on the relationship between state failure and terrorism arose specifically following the attacks of September 11, 2001. The US 9/11 Commission Report noted that ‘to find sanctuary, terrorist organizations have fled to some of the least governed, most lawless places in the world’. The European Security Strategy of 2003 additionally emphasized the connection between state failure and terrorism. ‘Bad governance – corruption, abuse of power, weak institutions and lack of accountability – and civil conflict corrode States from within. In some cases, this has brought about the collapse of State institutions. [. . .] Collapse of the State can be associated with obvious threats, such as organized crime or terrorism.’<sup>2</sup> In 2006, the aforementioned Quadrennial Defense Review underlined the role ungoverned areas played. ‘They [terrorists] exploit poorly governed areas of the world, taking sanctuary where states lack the capacity or the will to police themselves.’<sup>3</sup> Western policy documents seemed to be describing the phenomenon of terrorist black holes, but a policy framework was lacking.

## FAILURE OF THE STATE

Over the past years much has been written on so-called failed states. There is a substantive body of literature on the destabilizing effects of state failure. Migratory waves, regional destabilization, smuggling and spillover from civil conflicts are just some of the better known effects of state failure. State failure however becomes a classic security issue when groups exploit ungoverned areas from which to undertake activities that threaten international stability, the rule of law, or even the physical and territorial security of states. Yet how to discern which areas in which failed state are attractive as sanctuaries to particular terrorist groups?

A key obstacle can be found in the academic discussion regarding the typology of state failure. The current literature on state failure makes a distinction between various degrees of 'strength'.<sup>4</sup> Based on a Weberian conception of the nation-state, according to this group a state can generally be classified as strong, weak, failing, failed or collapsed. States are placed on a sliding scale of fragility on the basis of an assessment of instability, social tension, civil strife, corruption, presence of armed groups or anti-government violence in that state. In weak states, the state has difficulties enforcing the law but the fragility of the social fabric falls short of widespread violent ethnic conflict. In failed states, violent social conflict is common and governments are often predatory. In collapsed states there is no functioning state institution providing public goods whatsoever.

But how does this relate to the presence of groups that are defined by Western governments as terrorist? Are terrorist groups more likely to turn up in collapsed, failed or weak states? The theory on failed states is unable to answer these questions. Some have even doubted the absolute usefulness of talking about 'failed states'.<sup>5</sup> The study by Marret questions the viability of the concept of state failure given the fluid nature of the state across many parts of the globe, stressing that various alternative forms of governance and control exist in non-Western societies. Nevertheless, the nation-state remains the dominant reference point in the international Westphalian system. Although this concept may be Western in origin, it is the foundation of international law, holding that the state as represented by its internationally recognized governing entity – 'the government' – is responsible for law enforcement within its territory. The failure of the state to provide for law enforcement and other public goods is therefore a valuable concept for policy purposes, although for the study of terrorist sanctuaries reliance on the categorization of failed states creates a slippery slope.

It must also not be forgotten that it is not the state that is the threat, but rather the terrorist organization that exploits its weakness. A first step in shifting paradigms is to recognize the necessity of taking a non-state perspective when examining these types of terrorist sanctuaries and to focus on *ungoverned areas* rather than states in their entirety. After all, terrorist organizations make use of the Afghan–Pakistani border not Afghanistan in its entirety, the Colombian jungle instead of Colombia at large, the Sulu archipelago rather than the Philippines, Al-Anbar province instead of all of Iraq, and so on. In those areas where the Western nation-state has not rooted or been

expelled, *ungoverned areas* are created. They are *ungoverned* to the extent that formal Weberian governance is unable to be effectively executed by the internationally recognized, *de jure* governing power. In that regard, the state is failing. In these areas the government is not able to maintain a monopoly of law enforcement and violence. In these areas the legitimacy over parts of the territory may for instance be actively contested by separatists, or law enforcement capabilities are severely deflated due to rampant corruption. Ungoverned areas are thus created in states subjected to failure, yet not all failed states contain ungoverned areas.

#### HOW DO UNGOVERNED AREAS FORM?

The collapse of state institutions or even the dissolution of formal state governance can lead to absent government control over particular areas within the state. A concrete, yet extreme, example is Somalia, a country that since the beginning of the 1990s has come to signify a specific geographical space rather than a functioning sovereign political entity. Other areas suffering from substantial governmental weakness are the Caucasus, parts of West Africa and the Congo, and the instable provinces of Afghanistan such as Khost, Paktia, Zabul, Kandahar and Helmand – and Iraq, in particular Al-Anbar province in 2006.

Multiple factors can lead to the creation of an ungoverned area. Internal violent conflict is often its cause. Violent separatism and civil conflicts create areas that fall outside the control of the central government. The government's legitimacy over a particular area of the state is actively contested. The legitimacy of the state is weakened as its traditional monopoly over the use of force is lost and parallel societies are created. When the conflict is protracted in nature, *de facto* governance by a non-state group can be installed without a *de jure* recognition thereof; a state within a state is the result. Contested areas such as those parts of Sri Lanka claimed by the Tamil Tigers and the territory in the Colombian rainforest and mountains under the control of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are examples. Without *de jure* recognition, the pressure to commit to international transparency and provide disclosure of activities dissipates and groups are often seduced by the inherent opacity to support their cause by all available means.

Frozen conflicts such as in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan or an unclear post-conflict status as in Kosovo create untransparent areas where the central government has questionable legitimacy and effective governance by the state is undermined. Geopolitical characteristics also impact the ability of the central government to hold sway over its territory. Inhospitable terrain such as jungle, desert or mountainous areas present formidable challenges for law enforcement and have historically been the soft spots of modern states. This is particularly true when inhospitable terrain coincides with border areas.

Another factor is the proliferation of corruption throughout a society. Corruption is like a rot that hampers the ability of government to be effective, resolute and just. More often than not, several factors combine to render an area outside of government control. In the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, installing

effective governance has been tremendously testing due to a post-conflict disorder, the interference of regional players, the activities of rebel movements and large-scale corruption. It has further been amplified by the physical characteristics of the country's geography. Political vacuums, ungoverned areas and pockets of lawlessness are however not a new phenomenon. International organized crime syndicates and clandestine separatist groups operate necessarily from the soft underbelly of the nation-state and exploit the weak areas in the fabric of the international system. Where borders are porous, corruption is rampant, local support can be bought, forced or won, and freedom of movement is at a premium. Yet the rise of transnational terrorism as a strategic threat post-9/11 has shed light on the activities of terrorist groups in these areas.

#### SINE QUA NON

How do we explain the presence of particular terrorist groups in particular ungoverned areas? The essence of ungoverned areas in relation to terrorist groups is that they contain fundamentals that enable a terrorist group to operate in an environment beyond the control of the central authorities. The synergy between the two leads to the creation of terrorist black holes. Sanctuary is defined as 'a secure base area within which a non-state [militant] group is able to organize the politico-military infrastructure to support its activities'.<sup>6</sup> This infrastructure encompasses finding refuge, but also managing logistics, garnering capital, performing training and recruitment activities and establishing bases for operations. Terrorist organizations seek those areas which offer them the greatest comparative advantage to perform these activities.<sup>7</sup>

No fewer than 41 terrorist black holes have been analysed and elements that provide a comparative advantage to terrorist organizations have been distilled.<sup>8</sup> On the basis of that analysis seven broad elements have been defined, which in varying combinations create a patchwork shaping the appeal of an area to terrorist groups. Explicitly, not one of these factors individually is sufficient to explain why a terrorist group has a presence in that particular area. Instead it is the confluence of several factors (see Table 1) that mesh to spawn the particular conditions attracting a terrorist presence.

TABLE 1  
SEVEN ELEMENTS OF TERRORIST BLACK HOLES AND THEIR COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGES

Elements	Comparative Advantage
• lack of government control*	freedom of movement, refuge
• ethnic-religious communities/population	refuge, finances, recruitment, logistics, proximity of targets
• legacy from prior conflict (weapons, veterans etc.)	logistics, recruitment
• geographical characteristics	refuge, training
• economic opportunities	finance, logistics
• economic underdevelopment	refuge, recruitment, logistics
• external influences	proximity of targets, recruitment

Of these seven however, the lack of central governmental control over an area is a sine qua non for the creation of a terrorist black hole. Ungoverned areas enable terrorist organizations to have freedom of movement. Ungoverned areas make persecution unlikely and it allows the organization to fulfil that primary function of a sanctuary, namely the seeking of refuge. Freedom of movement is the essential characteristic that allows the group to undertake further supporting activities. Again, while it is a necessary factor, it is not sufficient.

#### CAPITALIZING ON FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

The second most prevalent component is the presence of particular ethnic or religious communities in the area. Conceptually their strategic essence follows from the military guerrilla doctrine as articulated in Mao Zedong's *Yu Chi Chan* (Guerrilla Warfare). Mao realized the value of the support of the local population to the irregular warfighter. The peasant population could provide the Chinese Red Army with shelter, food and camouflage. 'There is also a unity of spirit that should exist between troops and local inhabitants', Mao remarked. While seemingly straightforward and austere, Mao put forward the 'Three Rules and Eight Remarks' that were central to the Red Army's relationship with the local population:

##### *Rules:*

1. All actions are subject to command.
2. Do not steal from the people.
3. Be neither selfish nor unjust.

##### *Remarks:*

1. Replace the door when you leave the house.
2. Roll up the bedding on which you have slept.
3. Be courteous.
4. Be honest in your transactions.
5. Return what you borrow.
6. Replace what you break.
7. Do not bathe in the presence of women.
8. Do not without authority search the pocketbooks of those you arrest.<sup>9</sup>

This code of decency was based on Mao's fundamental understanding of the 'relationship that should exist between the people and the troops [guerrillas]. *The former may be likened to water and the latter to the fish who inhabit it* [emphasis added]. How may it be said that these two cannot exist together? It is only undisciplined troops who make the people their enemies and who, like the fish out its native element, cannot live.'<sup>10</sup> Mao relied on the voluntary support of the local population, winning their hearts and minds for the cause and making their support an integral part of the struggle.

While the activities of terrorist groups differ from those of Mao's Red Army in many ways, the principle of making use of the population to a group's benefit is similar. Mao envisioned that grossly outnumbered guerrilla fighters could find a force multiplier in their local environments; similarly terrorist groups use the local population as camouflage. In the border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan, a hostile environment renowned for its lack of government control, porous borders and tribal independence, Taliban and Al-Qaeda operatives can appeal to support from the local population on the basis of tribal, ideological, ethnical or religious motives. Due to the fragile social-tribal situation President Pervez Musharraf is unable to take strong measures against the presence of these groups. On the other side of the border President Hamid Karzai is incapacitated due to the overall destitute state of the government's law enforcement apparatus in these remote areas.

In southern Somalia Islamist extremists have exploited the chaos and disorder that has dominated the country for more than 16 years. In the Iraqi province of Al-Anbar, according to a US Marine Corps intelligence assessment, Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia 'has become an integral part of the social fabric of western Iraq'.<sup>11</sup> The organization finds passive, and at times active, support from the local population by appealing to nationalist and Sunni-religious motives. This relates to a further reason explaining the importance of these communities. It is often for their grievances that the terrorist organization is fighting and can constitute the group's *raison d'être*. For instance, the LTTE (Tamil Tigers) appeal to the Tamil population to support their operations because it is for their cause that they profess to fight.

In this regard, the presence of particular communities may have a direct relation to the location of terrorist operations, when a terrorist group 'plugs into' the grievances of a particular minority. The local population is essential to provide shelter, whether passive or active. If terrorist groups are from the same ethnic-religious background, the coalescence of combatant and non-combatant can take place, the community thereby acting like a cloak without necessarily actively supporting the terrorists.

Similarly, local populations may provide logistics support, new recruits or even financial support. Aside from an indigenous population, terrorist groups also make use of diaspora or refugee communities. Palestinian militants are able to operate with relative impunity from several Lebanese refugee camps. In the Georgian Pankisi Gorge, as late as 2002 Chechen rebels found refuge among the Chechen refugee community.<sup>12</sup> And, as will be detailed, Hizballah has used Lebanese migrant communities in South America among others as a node in its global financing network. A defining feature of local populations and diasporas constituting permissive environments is that there are commonalities between the community and the terrorist group to which the latter can appeal.

Similar to ethnic-religious factors, yet somewhat less salient in the current apparition of transnational terrorism, is economic underdevelopment. For instance, in the Northern Philippines and in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon economic malaise over the past decades contributed to the radicalization of elements among the local population. Recruitment and support for the New People's Army of the Philippines



Communist Party (CPP-NPA) and Hizballah has been facilitated in these areas. With respect to the former, the motivation of the envisioned 'class war' persists. Furthermore, the remnants of civil conflict in the form of substantial weapons caches or idle veterans are a potential source to tap for guerrilla and terrorist operations. This has particularly been beneficial to groups in eastern and southern Lebanon, Iraq and the south-eastern provinces of Afghanistan.

A non-human comparative advantage is constituted by the geographical characteristics of the area. The Somali–Kenyan border, a marshland sprinkled with bays and mangroves, has been host to among others Al-Ittihaad Al-Islamiya fighters. The Sulu archipelago, operating environment for the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and Abu Sayyaf, consisting of hundreds of islands covered with jungle foliage, offers rebels cover and refuge including training grounds. In north-western Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan the mountain ranges of the Hindu Kush provide austere non-permissive terrain, suitable to guerrillas. Although geography matters, it is reiterated that it is not a sufficient factor to explain a terrorist presence. Not all non-permissive terrain hosts non-state militants, a motivation to organize in these areas must be present.

Besides aforementioned factors of local communities, external influences impact the motivation of groups. External impulses are important contextual reasons for a terrorist group wanting to operate in a particular area. They take the form of target proximity. While transnational terrorist organizations have a regional, sometimes even a global perspective, finding sanctuary in an area with a proximity to targets has obvious operational benefits. The presence of American troops in urban areas in Iraq, of Coalition forces in urban areas in Afghanistan, or the continuing Israeli–Palestinian conflict fuel the motivation of terrorist groups and act as a magnet for potential fighters. Groups operate from ungoverned areas proximate to targets. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the Iraq War in particular are macro-level contextual factors making parts of the Middle East a hotbed for terrorist activity.

While most comparative advantages are driven by the underlying objective of undertaking operations in or near the area, black holes also exist for purely economic motivations. Terrorist organizations necessarily operate in the clandestine environment. It should therefore not come as a surprise that in terms of financing operations there is a significant amount of symbiosis between international organized crime and the operations of several terrorist networks. Particular resource-endowments can, in combination with lawlessness and rampant corruption, attract clandestine economic activities to which terrorist organizations are able to connect. In these areas criminal and terrorist networks often cohabit.<sup>13</sup> This is in particular the case with diamond-smuggling from West Africa.<sup>14</sup> Terrorist organizations attract funds from illicit activities including drug-trafficking and smuggling. To that extent they make use of similar routes as used by criminal gangs with a purely financial agenda. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan for instance has been involved in drug-trafficking through the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan during the late 1990s, the Taliban has been engaged in heroin production in Afghanistan throughout the same decade, and the FARC is active in cocaine production in

Colombia.<sup>15</sup> These clandestine operations are able to flourish due to a lack of effective and responsible government oversight in the area.

While the composition of local communities, economic opportunities, geography, external motivators and remnants from civil conflict are conducive to shaping a comparative advantage for a non-state militant organization, several of these are at the same time reasons for debilitating effective government control over the area. Non-permissive geographic environments hamper law enforcement, and benefit non-state actors. Social friction between ethnic minorities and the majority population can lead to a questioning of the legitimacy of the governing power, and similarly provide a terrorist group with a motivation for engaging in operations. A zero-sum game between effective government control and terrorist presence thus ensues. Hence, there is a cyclical relationship between the creation of ungoverned areas and comparative advantages for terrorist presence.

#### TRI-BORDER AREA: A CASE IN POINT

The comparative advantage of an area increases when a multitude of support activities can be performed there. The business-opportunities, so to speak, are greater. This is also invariably related to the number of black hole elements present. In the 1990s the tri-border area between Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay became a node in the operations of the Lebanese militant group Hizballah. The triple frontier has historically been known for its porous borders facilitating the uncontrolled flow of goods and people.<sup>16</sup> Corruption is rife and the proximity of the jungle and the faultlines of national judicial jurisdictions make law enforcement troublesome. But even more so, Hizballah 'plugged into' the Lebanese communities residing there. The Arab immigrant community, mostly of the Lebanese diaspora, exceeds 25,000 individuals and is 'teeming with Islamic extremists', according to one journalist.<sup>17</sup> The Paraguayan city of Ciudad del Este is an urban jungle where pirated goods are easily accessible, and contraband smuggling, drug trading and illegal arms sales are endemic. Making use of a combination of characteristics that facilitated logistical operations, financing as well as finding refuge, from here the organization orchestrated its 1992 and 1994 attacks in Buenos Aires.<sup>18</sup>

Whether the sanctuary is still in place in the tri-border area is an open question, however recent press releases relating to the area's persistence in the group's financial network does not bode well. The tri-border area provided Hizballah with a place of refuge, an infrastructure from which to deploy logistic and financial operations, recruiting ground, as well as training opportunities in the jungle. Central to this was the lawless nature of the area itself, allowing for substantial freedom of movement. Coupled to it was the proximity of various targets, namely the Israeli interests in Buenos Aires. The elements that rendered this area a black hole were geography, the presence of local diaspora communities, contextual external influences in the form of proximate targets and a lack of government control.

## BLACK HOLES AT SEA

Black holes also have an impact at sea. Commercial shipping companies and the oil and gas sectors have long felt the impact of lawlessness at sea in the form of piracy. Certain areas are so prone to piracy that ships engage in preventive anti-piracy measures rather than rely on maritime law enforcement.<sup>19</sup> The waters off the coasts of various ungoverned areas in West Africa, East Africa and the Indonesian archipelago are structurally vulnerable to piracy. In 2005 two-thirds of the instances of piracy occurred in these waters.<sup>20</sup> The oil infrastructure along the Nigerian coast has been a constant target for the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). Operating from the mangrove coastal area of the Niger Delta, the MEND is a non-state militant group not reluctant to use force in pressing its separatist agenda. Kidnappings atop oil rigs and clashes in open water between security personnel and militants are not uncommon. In February 2007 two dozen Philippine oil-workers were abducted by the MEND and held at their sanctuary in the delta. According to a journalist who visited the area: 'The waters are so dangerous in these parts that the Nigerian navy doesn't even dare patrol the region. In a word, it's a no-go zone for outsiders.'<sup>21</sup>

The distinction between terrorism and piracy is becoming blurred. This is where the relationship between Blackbeard and bin Laden becomes closer still. In October 2000 at the port of Aden off the coast of Yemen and close to the strategic waterway of the Bab-al-Mandab a suicide boat attack took place on the destroyer USS *Cole*, killing 17 and wounding 47 sailors. Almost two years later, in the same location, the French supertanker *Limburg* was the target, killing a crew member and spilling 90,000 barrels of oil in the Gulf of Aden. Both attacks have been attributed to Al-Qaeda affiliates and were likely organized from the ungoverned hinterland in north-eastern Yemen.

## BLACK HOLES IN THE WEST?

Most of the discussion regarding terrorist black holes and the role played by ungoverned areas focuses on non-Western states. Yet with an increase in terrorist activities inside European states – one need only think of the 7/7 London bombings, the Theo van Gogh murder in Amsterdam in November 2004, or the 11/4 attacks in Madrid – it begs the question whether terrorist black holes such as those that are observed in states with weak governance structures are present among Western societies? The jury is still out on this question but comparing the seven black hole-elements mentioned above to the characteristics of Western societies yields several observations. Surely, the presence of ethnic minority communities creates the potential of passively cloaking the operations of terrorist groups. Also, certain community centres or mosques are used for recruiting and financial operations.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, the Internet provides a virtual meeting ground for recruiting and basic theoretical and ideological training. External influences, such as Western military deployments in Iraq or Afghanistan, may provide the context for militant groups to seek targets within Western societies. However, necessarily in Western societies

militant groups must operate in hiding, they cannot operate in the open. Veritable parallel societies, allowing groups to operate with impunity, or areas absent law enforcement have not been created.

There is no structural lack of government control over parts of cities on the same scale as areas affected by separatist violence, although the riots in French city suburbs in October/November 2005 demonstrated that for a brief period of time this can be the case. In other words, because this key characteristic of ‘ungovernedness’ is lacking in Western cities, it seems the concept of the terrorist black hole is not applicable and the dynamic of terrorism in Europe must be seen as different from the synergy between terrorist groups and ungoverned areas. The dominant obstacle for European governments is not law enforcement capacity or a willingness to use it; rather it is the difficulty of obtaining accurate law enforcement intelligence.

In ungoverned areas however it is the reverse or all three seem to be lacking. According to Harm de Blij, one of the reasons why Paris, London, Hamburg or New York cannot be considered terrorist sanctuaries is because they are more ‘orderly urban environments’ than Peshawar, Jakarta, Cairo or Manila.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless the French riots were a signal that the European default of government control does not stand uncontested.

#### CONCLUSION

This article is not an intelligence report, nor does it aspire to be. Yet what it presents is a conceptualization of the observed synergy between ungoverned areas and terrorist groups. Sanctuaries constitute an important geopolitical component in understanding the security threat posed by transnational terrorism. Terrorist black holes lie at the crossroads between transnational terrorism and state failure. They are formed by the ability of non-state militant groups to exploit certain areas around the world where *de jure* governance by the central authorities is absent or has been disqualified. Black holes are at their core permissive environments where a terrorist group enjoys freedom of action and finds particular advantages.

Dealing with them requires a strategy rendering the areas less attractive to the terrorist group, namely to focus policy efforts on those elements that create the comparative advantage. This sounds easier than is done. How to target the comparative advantage that mountainous terrain offers a militant? How to avoid clandestine economic transactions occurring in conflict zones? How to crack down on arms caches scattered around a region?

The answer lies by focusing on the sine qua non for the existence of terrorist black holes, namely the lack of effective governance over an area. This requires long-term efforts that involve all instruments of foreign policy. As George Kennan said in 1954: ‘[I]n no area of our foreign policy will we be well served, in this coming period, by an approach directed strictly to countering the [...] threat as a straight military problem.’<sup>24</sup> Although he spoke of the Soviet Union at the time, the same principle holds true for dealing with terrorist black holes. Addressing the weak spots of the nation-state requires a coherent approach with a cohesive strategy. Unless a

broad approach is chosen that focuses on dealing with black holes, areas around the world will persist to attract the attention of future Blackbeards and bin Ladens.

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