



The link between ‘ungoverned spaces’ and terrorism: myth or reality?

KEY POINTS

- **The term ‘ungoverned space’ is contested.** And the very existence of truly ‘ungoverned space’ is questionable, as is its relationship to terrorism.
- **There are, however, a range of identifiable factors that help create an environment conducive to a terrorist presence.** But such environments can be observed within a variety of international jurisdictions – both ‘strong’ states and ‘weak’ or ‘failed’ ones.

DETAIL

What do we mean by ‘ungoverned space’?

Prior to 9/11, the humanitarian problems resulting from ‘weak’ or ‘failed’ states were known. But they were not thought to have strategic or security significance. But **9/11 appeared to provide evidence of a clear link between ‘weak’ and ‘failed’ states and transnational threats.** Primarily, though not exclusively, terrorism.

Two characteristics are key to understanding the possible security implications of weak and failed states. First, the **perceived inability or unwillingness to provide the fundamental political goods associated with statehood:** physical security, legitimate political institutions, economic management and social welfare. And second, the so-called ‘**ungoverned space**’ that, it is said, can result from state weakness. This refers both to **physical territory and the non-physical space in which effective state sovereignty and control is either absent or only partial (eg. the judiciary).** Or where **formal state institutions and rule of law serve little or no function.**

These so-called ‘**ungoverned spaces**’ are said to offer multiple benefits to **terrorist groups**, including the provision of ‘safe havens’ where terrorists can plan, train and indoctrinate, secure access to weapons and equipment, the ability to engage in illegal smuggling to generate income, and the benefit they can derive from the existence of staging grounds and transit zones. For these reasons, the **concept of ‘ungoverned space’ continues to pervade discussion of security threats – and terrorism in particular.**

Is this a helpful term? Can areas of land ever truly be ‘ungoverned’?

The **term ‘ungoverned space’ is contested.** And the very **existence of truly ‘ungoverned space’ is questionable.** As is its relationship to terrorism. The term ‘ungoverned space’ is unhelpful for six main reasons:

It is a catch-all term that does not accurately reflect the great variations between and within states. One size does not fit all. Each state and area within it must be seen in its own context. For this reason, parts of Somalia can never be the ‘new Tora Bora’. And parts of Mali can never be ‘the new Waziristan’.

It takes a state-centric approach. In other words, it **assumes that only states govern** and that no other forms of governance exist. So the term 'ungoverned space' creates an illusion of a vacuum in areas where state authority may be limited. But **states and areas within them are always governed** in some way. Even if they are **under-governed, poorly-governed or mis-governed**. Or where **state authority may be contested**, e.g., by local actors or practices. The implication of this state-centric approach is that the 'solution' to problems is also state-based. But this is not always, or even often, the case.

It does not capture the actual practices of power and exercise of different forms of governance, e.g., tribal, sectarian, or clan-based. From a state-centric, Western perspective, **we may not recognise, fully understand or necessarily approve of how these different forms of governance work.** But **different forms of governance do exist** in most, if not all, 'ungoverned spaces'. It follows that so-called 'lawless' areas are never truly 'lawless'. Consequently, some scholars have suggested that **'alternatively governed spaces' is a more accurate description** of the different forms of governance that can be identified in many parts of the world.

It assumes that those in 'ungoverned' spaces are more likely to engage in forms of violence that are destabilising. This assumed propensity to violence is seen as **direct and indirect**, e.g., providing the means required for terrorist acts or providing 'safe havens' for terrorist groups. But while there is some evidence to suggest a link between the reach of state authority, different types of governance and terrorism, it is **not certain that 'ungoverned space' is as central to terrorist groups as is commonly thought.** Especially as violent actors, including some terrorist groups, do not always need large 'ungoverned', sparsely populated or under-developed spaces in order to have effect. Or they may find such areas only useful for a certain period of time.

It focuses attention on 'weak' or 'failed' states, not the conditions sometimes provided by 'strong' states. And given some of the elements terrorist groups need to pose a threat, any state that has sufficient financial and logistical infrastructure, communications, transportation and/or banking services is likely to be more attractive to a terrorist group than a vast expanse of under-populated and/or undeveloped territory.

It does not explain why, despite endemic state weakness/fragility in much of the developing world, terrorism does not flourish in all of these settings. The periphery of many/most states – and many inner cities – is not so much 'governed' as tied to central authorities through patronage, negotiation, if not entirely by laissez-faire neglect. All of which, the world over, gives well-resourced terrorists the opportunities to establish political, economic, military or social ties. But there is **great diversity in levels of terrorist presence and activity in states experiencing weakness or fragility.**

What do terrorist groups need to pose a threat?

Before examining what makes an environment attractive to a terrorist group, it is worth addressing some **common misconceptions.**

- **Terrorist groups do not need vast expanses of space.** From 2001 until ISIL's recent advances in Iraq, none of the terrorist groups keen to attack the UK had been

able to hold vast portions of territory. Many had gained territory but subsequently suffered losses. So **we have long been more concerned about smaller-scale operations**: safe houses in Yemen or Pakistan, or pockets of territory acquired by Al Shabaab in Somalia.

- **Terrorist groups do not require a completely 'safe' haven.**
- **CT pressure, be it local or international, is almost inevitable.** And **terrorist groups have adapted** to work around its many forms. In some cases, the level of chaos present in such a scenario can help terrorist groups to blend into the background, or attacks from external players can push groups closer together.

'Ungoverned spaces' can exist in 'strong' states, including in Western states

Although these countries may have more sophisticated security capabilities, **it has not stopped bomb factories being (temporarily) established in the West.** The lifespan of these spaces will be shorter than those in 'weak' or 'failed' states. But they are still able to operate.

'Ungoverned spaces' are not just found in rural areas

Although typically described as somewhere akin to the Tora Bora caves in Afghanistan or the disputed territory of Galgala Hills in Somalia, **'ungoverned spaces' can, and do, appear in urban environments too.**

What makes an environment conducive to terrorist presence?

There are several **indicators of conduciveness** to terrorist presence (this list is not intended to be exhaustive):

- *Lack of state penetration*
 - An **absence of state institutions or an inability/unwillingness of the state to intervene.** In remote areas, state institutions may be unable to penetrate areas of territory owing to a **lack of physical infrastructure**, making the area more amenable to terrorist groups.
 - **Pre-existing social and cultural resistance to government authority** makes it easier for terrorist groups to gain a foothold, and allows them to weave their own narrative into existing grievances. **Reliance on tribal governance (instead of the state) can sometimes provide a more amenable interlocutor** for terrorist groups.
- *Lack of state monopoly of force*
 - The existence of **organised armed groups, criminal networks and a population with access to arms increases the likelihood of terrorist presence.** Terrorists are able to work alongside existing armed groups in an attempt to 'blend in'. They often use criminal networks to aid their activities. A local population with access to arms increases the availability of weapons to a terrorist group, while also providing a stock of armed recruits.

- *Lack of border controls*
 - This **enables terrorists to move freely between countries**, spreading the threat they pose. This has been a **particular issue post-Arab Spring. Terrorist groups are adept at exploiting cross-border links established by local tribes**. This enables groups to have a base of operation in one country and carry out attacks into another. For those using kidnap for ransom as a tactic, quick and easy movement across borders can minimise the chances of disruption and maximise the chances of delivering a hostage to a known safe house.

- *The level of external interference*
 - This can have benefits and disadvantages for terrorist groups. In some cases, it can be **helpful to be under pressure from external interference**: it can lure new recruits, add to propaganda outputs and increase financial donations. But **interference is often of a military nature and can therefore have implications for security of terrorist groups**.

- *An adequate level of infrastructure*
 - Terrorist groups require this to be able to pose a threat. Contrary to popular opinion, they work best when they are not isolated in deserts, mountains or caves. Terrorist groups need to maintain three key elements of infrastructure:
 - **Communications must be maintained within the group itself, with other like-minded groups and with potential new recruits**. Without access to telephones and the internet, terrorist groups would struggle to exist.
 - **Financial transactions must be conducted**. Without the opportunity to do this, a group would not be able to exist.
 - **Transportation must be readily available**. This **need not be sophisticated**. Access to transportation **allows groups to receive fighters, goods, and weapons, as well as leave their area of operation** to conduct attacks. For those groups seeking to plot attacks further afield, facilitation networks allowing onward access to international airports is essential.

- *Favourable demographics*
 - The **presence of other extremist groups provides like-minded groups to work alongside**. When faced with a common enemy, the **extremist groups work together to relocate or fight** against the incursion. There can be **added safety in numbers**.
 - A **pre-existing state of violence** may mean that **violent jihadis are more easily accepted by the local population**. But much depends on the type

of violence conducted by the terrorist group: excessive violence or targeting Muslim civilians is often not tolerated.

- *Sources of Income*

- These should be readily available. Terrorist groups have **many ways of obtaining funding**: extortion, kidnap for ransom, crime, taxation are all tried-and-tested. For groups seeking to administer territory, taxation from the local population can be easily obtained. **Groups without territory to call their own may be more reliant on external income** sources: they will need access to financial facilitation routes to receive this.

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