

Terrorist Activities in Ungoverned Spaces:
Evidence and Observations from the Horn of Africa

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Introduction

As you know the jihad started without planning or coordination. . .each member of the movement is fanatically attached to his tribe. . . There is no true desire in the leadership. . .[There is] lack of secrecy in the movement in managerial and military issues. . .Leave it, it is rotten Tribalism.

Translation of report by Omar Taj al Bin abd Allah “Abu Belal” to al Qaeda leadership, on the state of Somalia’s Islamist movement, circa 1992, Harmony Project AFGP-2002-800640.

Kenya is not a good place. . .the cost of living is high, plus corruption is dangerously prevalent – there is theft, house break-ins, no political stability, and it is possible there will be an explosion in the country.

Translation of Al Qaeda report, circa 1993, Harmony Project, AFGP -2002-800597.

To what extent do “ungoverned spaces” facilitate the activities of international terrorist organizations? And which particular terrorist activities are more or less likely to flourish in zones of state collapse or state weakness?

The general link between failed states and transnational terrorist networks has been invoked repeatedly since 9/11. “Illicit transnational networks, particularly terrorist and criminal groups, target weak and failed states for their activities,” concludes the Report of the Commission on Weak States and US National Security.¹ The 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States of America notes as well that “weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states. . . .[P]overty, weak institutions, and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders.”² The link between state failure and terrorist threats has been seized upon by multilateral and bilateral aid agencies to promote greater levels of funding for capacity-building and state-building in “fragile states,” which, according to the latest count by the World Bank, now number twenty-six – sixteen of which are in Africa.³

The challenge to analysts and policy-makers is to push beyond the obvious bromides about the dangers of ungoverned spaces and assess more specifically what kinds of dangers they do and do not pose, and under what specific conditions of state failure. To that end, this paper reviews publicly available evidence on the activities of terrorist networks in the Horn of Africa, a region which by most accounts features both the largest and most diverse array of ungoverned space in sub-Saharan Africa.⁴ It is based on several sources of information: fieldwork conducted between 1998 and 2006 by the author in Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, and Eritrea; review of secondary sources; and newly available, declassified primary documentation on al Qaeda activities in Africa, made available via the US government’s Harmony Project.⁵ The study catalogs the variety of “ungoverned spaces” in the Horn of Africa; discusses the key security and governance features of areas beyond effective government authority; inventories different types of terrorist activities; maps known terrorist activities in the

Horn of Africa; identifies patterns of terrorist activities in specific types of ungoverned space; and assesses the significance of those patterns and their implications for ungoverned spaces in southern Africa. It concludes that the most ungoverned spaces – zones of complete state collapse – are only suited for a limited number of terrorist activities. Many other terrorist activities appear better able to thrive in a weak or compromised state setting. Terrorist cells will seek to mix and match the opportunities afforded by different governance settings within a region to maximize their likelihood of success and minimize the risk of detection and betrayal.

Ungoverned spaces

“Ungoverned space” is a term meant to connote a general condition of weak to non-existent state authority in a defined geographic area. It is a relatively recent addition to the lexicon of the study of failed states, and like other terms used in that field of research it is imprecise and value-laden. The fact that it is an expression preferred by the US Department of Defense adds to the baggage the term carries; some critics of US foreign policy see it as an attempt to justify unilateral counter-terrorist actions in weak or failed states. Use of the term in this study is simply intended to describe a particular range of political conditions. As such, it describes a political condition along a spectrum which includes complete state collapse; intermittent, predatory state presence, usually in the form of a garrison state; partial state collapse, wherein a state authority exists but has no writ in certain regions within its territory; and weak or failed states, which maintain only a cosmetic and ineffective presence in frontier zones or large urban slums that are essentially beyond the control of government authorities. Theresa Whelan makes the distinction between physical ungoverned spaces – those hinterlands beyond the effective reach of a weak state – and “non-physical” ungoverned spaces, domains within a state where the government is unable or unwilling to exercise authority.⁶ These distinctions matter a great deal, as they present very different local operating environments for potential criminal and terrorist activities.

All of these variations on state failure can be found in the Horn of Africa. South-central Somalia has been a zone of complete state collapse for most of the past sixteen years. Most of southern Sudan, portions of northern Uganda, and the easternmost region of Somaliland have all been beyond the authority of governments which claim jurisdiction over them; northern frontier regions of Kenya and the Karamoja areas of eastern Uganda enjoy only a weak and in some cases nominal presence of government authorities; neighborhoods in the large urban areas of Nairobi and Mombasa in Kenya are also beyond the reach of effective government policing; and peripheral regions of Ethiopia and Sudan exemplify the garrison state presence.

In all of these areas, state presence is, in varying combinations, weak, sporadic, predatory, and/or ineffective. Such conditions often correspond to chronic levels of local insecurity, including armed criminality, communal clashes, and warlordism. Remote border areas are especially susceptible to this condition of “not peace not war” as locals often describe it. The ubiquitous presence of inexpensive semi-automatic weapons through the Horn of Africa renders insecurity much more lethal than in the past. New

pressures on populations – resource scarcity, government use of paramilitaries, commercialized cattle raiding, political manipulation of ethnic tensions, refugee flows – all combine to increase the likelihood that ungoverned spaces in the Horn of Africa are exceptionally prone to armed violence.

Not surprisingly, ungoverned spaces in the Horn of Africa have been sites of chronic humanitarian emergencies and widespread displacement, and hence the target of long-running international relief operations. International NGOs and UN specialized agencies often confront in these complex emergencies high levels of insecurity and enormous logistical and operational problems. Somalia and Sudan in particular have constituted among the most expensive humanitarian operations in the world, due to the complex security and logistical problems they present. And security for relief agencies is poor. Relief aid and employment is often a major resource over which local militias and factions fight; aid agencies often unwittingly become captive to a particular ethnic group or faction, and risk being target by rival groups; extortion and kidnapping are at times serious threats; and logistics and security issues dominate both time and budgets. In short, many humanitarian crises in ungoverned areas are labeled “non-permissive environments” by aid agencies.

Governance in ungoverned spaces

But ungoverned spaces are not anarchic, and in this sense the term “ungoverned spaces” is misleading. Even zones of complete state collapse like south-central Somalia feature a variety of local arrangements and systems of “governance with a small g.” These local security and governance systems typically involve hybrid arrangements drawing on a combination of traditional authorities and customary law, civic and religious groups, business interests, neighborhood watch groups, private security forces (of business groups), and tribal self-defense units.⁷ These local systems of governance are overlapping, fluid, fragile and vulnerable to spoilers, and generally illiberal, but they do provide a measure of security, predictability, and rule of law in the absence of state authority.

Where governments in the Horn of Africa maintain a physical presence but are weak, we have seen the rise of “mediated state arrangements” in northern Kenya and southern Sudan. There, provincial state authorities have at times ceded authority to either traditional authorities (as with the Government of South Sudan’s decentralization of Boma court jurisdiction to tribal chiefs)⁸ or hybrid community governance structures, such as the “peace and development committees” which have done much to improve public security in northern Kenya.⁹

Regional governments and international aid agencies in the fields of peace-building and rule of law are only beginning to systematically examine the possibilities of working with these local governance systems in areas where the formal state is at least temporarily unable or unwilling to function effectively. Local governance systems have proven relatively effective at conflict management and at dispensing justice on disputes

which easily lend themselves to applications of customary law. It is much less clear whether these local governance and security arrangements, which are generally ad hoc coping mechanisms by local communities facing often new and overwhelming security threats, have a role to play in monitoring or discouraging activities of transnational criminal and terrorist groups seeking to exploit ungoverned spaces. In the Horn of Africa, the United States has resorted to forging relations with militia leaders in Somalia in hopes they will serve as eyes and ears against al-Qaeda activities, while regional states routinely use tribal paramilitaries (or self-defense forces) to extend their capacity to monitor zones beyond their direct control. Tribal elders are also on government payrolls across the Horn of Africa and are at times expected to report on suspicious activities, though their capacity to do so is often limited. Generally, civic groups and leaders are much more likely to report suspicious behavior to state authorities when state-society relations enjoy at least some degree of trust and legitimacy. Where local communities view the state as a threat or an enemy, foreign terrorist activity is much more likely to go unreported by local communities.

Terrorist activities in the Horn of Africa

The following inventory of recent, publicly documented cases of terrorist activity in the Horn of Africa since the early 1990s includes only activities of al Qaeda or radical Islamist groups believed to have some link to al Qaeda. Ethnic and other non-Islamist insurgencies which are considered terrorist organizations by the governments they attack – such as the Lord's Resistance Army (Uganda), the Oromo Liberation Front (Ethiopia), and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (Ethiopia) – are not considered in this study, though it should be stressed that in many parts of Africa domestic insurgency movements using terrorist tactics are a greater concern to African governments than is the threat of international terrorism (which mainly targets western and US interests in the region). In practice, this means coverage of the activities of foreign and local al Qaeda operatives; the jihadist cells in the now dormant-Somali Islamist group Al-Ittihad al-Islamiyya (AIAD); the jihadist *shabaab* militia in the now dissolved-Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), including both Somalis and foreign mujahideen; Eritrean Islamic Jihad (EIJ); the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia (Ethiopia); Takfir wal-Hijra (Sudan); Gamaa Islamiyya (Egyptian, but based in Sudan); and the Government of Sudan itself from roughly 1991 to 2001 (the only instance of state-sponsored terrorism in the Horn).¹⁰

Terrorist attacks

Since 1991, no other region of sub-Saharan Africa has been the site of as many international terrorist attacks and attempted acts of terrorism as has the Horn of Africa. These attacks include the 1998 US embassy bombings in Nairobi Kenya and Dar es Salaam Tanzania by al Qaeda operatives; the Paradise hotel bombing in Mombasa in December 2002 by al Qaeda-affiliated operatives; the attempted downing of a chartered Israeli tourist plane in Mombasa in December 2002 by al Qaeda-affiliated operatives;¹¹ and the series of bombings of government buildings and transportation infrastructure in Ethiopia in the mid-1990s by the Somali group Al –Ittihad al-Islamiyya.¹² The embassy bombings were part of a carefully planned reconnaissance by an East African al Qaeda

cell initiated as early as 1993.¹³ Fazul Abdulla Mohammed, a Comorean with Kenyan travel documents, headed this cell, while a Kenyan, Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, headed the Mombasa cell which planned the Paradise Hotel and the surface to air missile firing on the Israeli charter flight. The planning and reconnoitering for the Nairobi embassy bombing attacks was done in Kenya, with two Islamic charities, Help Africa People and Mercy International Relief Agency, used to front the terrorist activities.¹⁴ The two embassy bombings resulted in 225 dead and 4,000 wounded, the vast majority of whom were Kenyans and Tanzanians. Measured in human lives, these were the worst terrorist incidents on the continent on record.

In addition, a number of planned terrorist attacks in the region have been pre-empted. For instance, an al-Qaeda plot to bomb the US Embassy in Kampala, Uganda was thwarted in September 1998, only a month after the Nairobi and Dar es Salaam embassy bombings.¹⁵ A plot to fly a light aircraft from Somalia into the US Embassy in Nairobi in 2004 was uncovered, leading to a temporary ban on all flights between Kenya and Somalia. Security alerts warning of plans by the Fazul cell to launch a missile attack at aircraft leaving Nairobi's Kenyatta airport in May 2003 led to suspension of British Air flights to Kenya. That same year, Kenyan and American intelligence picked up "chatter" that led to the discovery of a safe house in Mombasa where five anti-tank weapons were stored, apparently intended for use against soft targets along the coast.¹⁶ In September 2005, a plot to bomb polling stations in an effort to sabotage elections in Somaliland was uncovered days before the elections were held, and Somalis linked to jihadist cells based in Mogadishu were charged and convicted.

Al Qaeda leadership also expressed intent to target American peacekeeping forces deployed to Somalia in 1993, sending several missions into the country to investigate possibilities for providing training to clan factions or jihadists. Available evidence suggests that these forays by al Qaeda did not amount to as much direct involvement in subsequent clashes between the militia of General Aideed and UN forces as some reports have claimed. Crisis Group's assessment of al Qaeda's inflated claims that it was partially responsible for the "Black Hawk Down" firefight which claimed the lives of 18 US soldiers in October 1993 concludes that the al Qaeda role was "marginal."¹⁷ That assessment is backed up by more recent evidence, which portrays the forays by their Kenyan-based operatives to Mogadishu as somewhat ill-formed and frustrated exploratory trips. One defendant in the "USA versus Osama bin Laden" trial described the trip report to Somalia by an associate as follows: "he said it is not easy to start [an al Qaeda operation in Somalia] because different tribe[s], different groups, there's nobody control[ing what's] going on over there."¹⁸

Though the al Qaeda forays into Somalia in the early 1990s were inconsequential, the principal reason for al Qaeda's desire to sabotage the US-led peace enforcement operation in Somalia was revealing. Osama bin Laden was convinced that a successful UN peace operation in Somalia would open the door for a similar US-led intervention in Sudan, which by 1993 has become a major state-sanctioned safe haven for al Qaeda and other terrorist movements. The desire to protect its safe haven in Sudan was a major impetus for al Qaeda's expansion of operations into Kenya and Somalia.

With the exception of the relatively minor AIAI strikes against Ethiopian targets in the mid-1990s and the failed Somaliland bombing, almost all of the major terrorist attacks in the Horn of Africa, and most known plots which were not carried out, have been planned or executed mainly by foreigners and Kenyan nationals believed to be affiliated to al Qaeda, aiming at soft targets in Kenya.¹⁹ Citizens of other states in the region have been relatively minor players in terrorist acts.

Political Assassinations and Threats

The Horn of Africa has seen a considerable number of political assassinations and attempted assassinations allegedly by jihadist movements. The most famous of these was a failed attempt on the life of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during his visit to Ethiopia in 1995 by the Egyptian *Gamaa Islamiya*. That assassination attempt was clearly linked both to the *Gamaa Islamiya* cell operating out of Khartoum and to officials in the government of Sudan. The incident led to targeted UN sanctions on Sudan and diplomatic isolation of the country, as well as a power struggle inside the government which eventually produced a change of policy and an end to Sudan's sponsorship of foreign terrorists, including Osama bin Laden himself.

Islamic jihadists have used assassination as a tool of choice in a variety of other settings in the Horn, especially in Somalia. There, a small cell or cells which have come to be generically referred to as the *shabaab* (youth) militia, some of whom are led by a young radical Aden Hashi 'Ayro, is responsible for dozens of political assassinations since 2003.²⁰ Most of those targeted for assassination were Somalis suspected of collaboration with western counter-terrorism monitoring – mainly former military and internal security officers -- but leading civil society critics have also been among the victims of these attacks. This has had a chilling effect on public criticism and opposition to Islamist movements in Mogadishu. Several assassination attempts aimed at the TFG President and Prime Minister have been launched but failed since 2005, including two suicide car bombings in the provisional capital Baidoa in 2006, one of which narrowly missed injuring President Yusuf. Suicide bombings were previously unheard of in Somalia and represent a new form of terrorist technology in the country.

A number of foreign aid workers and journalists have also been assassinated by these jihadi cells since 2003, beginning with the death of American Deena Umbarger in the Lower Jubba region in 1999. Most of those targeted worked in Somaliland, and their assassinations appear designed mainly to undermine Somaliland's bid for secession. Messages and warnings posted on Somali websites known to be outlets for jihadi figures conflate all UN and western aid agencies with a conspiracy led by the US against Islam, and in one instance accused UN humanitarian aircraft delivering food aid to food victims of providing Ethiopia with aerial reconnaissance. Specific threats against internationals led to the temporary relocation of all UN international staff from Somalia in October 2006. The head of UN security in Somalia and other foreigners reporting on Somalia have received threats as well, sometimes prompting their relocation out of the region. There is every reason to believe that assassinations and death threats will continue to play

a worrisome role in Somali political life, and that most – though not all – of those threats are emanating from jihadist cells.

Jihadi assassinations have occurred in other parts of the Horn of Africa but are far less common than in Somalia. The AIAI attempted to assassinate an Ethiopian minister in 1995 in Addis Ababa; news of an assassination plot by the Somali jihadist cell responsible for the deaths of several foreign aid workers in Somaliland prompted the cancellation of a visit to Djibouti by the German President;²¹ and the radical Sudanese splinter group Takfir wal-Hijra launched series of assassination attempts against Islamist rivals in the 1990s. The group may even be responsible for an attempt on the life of Osama bin Laden in Khartoum in 1994.²² In another example of radical Islamist infighting in Sudan, the well-known editor of the Islamist daily al Wifaq, Muhammad Taha, was beheaded in September 2006. Taha had been accused by Islamist militants of “dishonoring the prophet” and while the killers remain at large, militant Islamists, possibly linked al Qaeda, are thought to be behind the assassination.²³

In contrast to the terrorist attacks, most of the political assassinations carried out in the Horn have been executed by local jihadists, mainly directed at local rivals or international targets operating in their home areas. Somalia has been home to the vast majority of these targeted killings. Most of the assassins have never been brought to justice, suggesting that targeted killing is an effective, and low-risk tactic in ungoverned spaces.

Operation of Training Bases

Only a few al Qaeda-affiliated training bases have been established in the Horn of Africa, but they have been cause for considerable concern. By far the most worrisome and large-scale of these training opportunities were those sponsored by the government of Sudan from 1991-1996, at a time when Hassan al Turabi helped to turn Sudan into what one US government official called a “Holiday Inn for terrorists.”²⁴ Osama bin Laden himself financed several terrorist training camps in Sudan, and the government sponsored a series of conferences under the aegis of the “Popular Arab and Islamic Conference” that the US government claimed constituted planning sessions for terrorist plots.²⁵ Officially-sanctioned terrorist training facilities in Sudan dried up after 1996 with the shift in government policy there.

Somalia has intermittently hosted small jihadi training sites – at Luuq, in the early 1990s; at the remote coastal site Ras Kamboni in the late 1990s; and in at least two sites in Mogadishu, one of which was a former Italian cemetery desecrated by jihadi leader ‘Ayro, under the control of the hardline wing of the Union of Islamic Courts in the 2004-06 period.²⁶ Evidence from recently released al Qaeda documents implies that other attempts to conduct training took place indoors in Mogadishu to avoid detection, as well as at least one preliminary attempt to establish a training site in a remote area of the Ogaden region of Ethiopia.²⁷

Training sites, in sum, have tended to be set up either in locations sponsored by a state authority or in remote areas of state collapse. Though Kenya has attracted many other terrorist activities, al Qaeda cells appear to have been judged training camps to be too risky to place inside Kenya.

Recruitment

The Horn of Africa has been an uneven source of recruitment for al Qaeda and other jihadist cells. On the one hand, all of the major terrorist attacks which have occurred in the region in the past fifteen years have included at least a few individuals indigenous to the region. The US embassy bombings in 1998 implicated a Sudanese (Tariq Abdulla “al-Sudani”) and several Kenyans (including Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan), and were provided logistical support inside Somalia by Somali Hassan Dahir Aweys.²⁸ Coastal Kenya has been the main source of local recruits into al Qaeda-affiliated cells; that region’s unhappy history of political marginalization and loss of land to powerful Kenyan interests from the high country may be a partial explanation for this trend. The assassinations and terrorist attacks inside Ethiopia by AIAI and the Somali *shabaab* cells have been conducted entirely by Somali jihadists.

On the other hand, the Horn of Africa has proven nowhere near as fertile ground for al Qaeda recruitment as has Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. Few Sudanese, Somalis, Kenyans, and Ethiopians figure prominently as leaders in the al Qaeda network, and none served as suicide bombers in the 9/11 attacks. This is especially significant in the case of Sudan, where residents had occasion to enjoy close contact with a range of terrorist groups in the first half of the 1990s. Some of the several hundreds of Horn residents who did opt to join the mujahideen in Afghanistan accrued dangerous skill sets and ideological convictions – including Somalia’s Adan Hashi ‘Ayro – but as a group have not returned to their home countries prepared to wage jihad. Despite conditions which appear to make the region fertile ground for recruitment, including an increasingly angry, marginalized, and radicalized Muslim population, the Horn of Africa has generally been unreceptive to recruitment into jihadi movements.

That may change in the future, however. As has occurred in many parts of the Islamic world, various salafist missionary and charity movements such as Tabliq have aggressively moved into predominantly sufi areas and have established new mosques, schools, and social services. Though most of these salafist schools and mosques do not espouse jihadi violence, they render adherents more susceptible to radical, intolerant interpretations and have proven to be excellent sites for recruitment by jihadi groups. Across the Horn of Africa, including in Muslim communities in Ethiopia, these movements have moved in to fill gaps in social services left by dysfunctional or weak states.

Recruitment of Horn residents into terrorist groups must include mention of the diaspora. Most of the countries of the Horn are now, to varying degrees, diasporic nations, with a significant portion of their population living outside the country. To date, the Horn of Africa diaspora has been somewhat more susceptible to recruitment by

terrorist or jihadi movements than the resident population in the Horn of Africa. The most notable case in this regard was the involvement of a number of Eritrean and Ethiopian youth in a botched copy-cat bombing attempt in London in 2005. Several Somalis have been arrested in the US and Canada and charged with conspiracy to commit terrorist acts as part of police sweeps there. Finally, a considerable number of Somali diaspora members returned to Somalia to join the *shabaab* militia, where they acquired skills in explosives and war-fighting.

Establishment of Safe Havens

The Horn of Africa has served at times as an important site for safe havens for al Qaeda and other terrorists. The most overt case was the state-sponsored haven provided to a half dozen or more terrorist networks, including al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, by the government of Sudan from 1991-96. Once the costs of hosting foreign terrorists grew too high for the government of Sudan to bear, however, the radical Islamist wing of the government (the Turabi wing) was marginalized and the more pragmatic leadership of President al-Bashir evicted the foreign terrorists. Somalia has been an intermittent safe haven for a small number of foreign al Qaeda-affiliated terrorists, namely the leaders of the East Africa cell led by Fazul and al-Sudani. Hardline Somali Islamists Hassan Dahir Aweys, Hassan Turki, and Aden Hashi 'Ayro are directly implicated in providing safe haven to these individuals, and in the case of Aweys has been their primary contact in Somalia over the past decade, as recently released al Qaeda documents demonstrate.

Interestingly, the weak state of Somaliland appears to have served as safe haven to a larger number of foreign terrorist elements than has stateless Somalia to the south. The town of Burao – Somaliland's second largest city after the capital, and an important commercial center for goods transiting from the interior to the port of Berbera – has only come gradually and partially under the administrative control of the government of Somaliland. In recent times, it has been a known center of often radical Islamist activities, mainly involving Somalis. In 2001, considerable numbers of foreigners linked to Tabliq, Da'wa, and al Qaeda concentrated in the town, so much so that it generated attention and infiltration by concerned governments as far away as Iraq and Libya.²⁹

But the most important safe haven for al Qaeda operatives, al-Qaeda affiliated jihadists, and al Qaeda sleeper cells in the region has been Kenya. Court testimony, documents from the US Government's Harmony Project, and other open sources point clearly to the fact that al Qaeda dispatched cells to set up a base in Kenya as early as 1993. Multiple cells operated unimpeded throughout the country (mainly in Nairobi and Mombasa). Foreign al Qaeda operatives were able to enter the country freely, set up businesses, establish and operate Islamic charities, marry into local communities, rent light aircraft to come and go from Somalia, hold meetings, communicate with al Qaeda figures outside the country, transfer money, stockpile weapons, and engage in years of reconnoitering possible targets for terrorist attacks. A review of the "USA versus Osama bin Laden" court proceedings and all available documents on Somalia and Kenya in the Harmony Project paints a remarkable portrait of al Qaeda cells freely operating in Kenya, with no expressed concerns about being monitored or detained by Kenyan police or

security forces. The ease with which they chartered small planes to fly in and out of Luuq, Somalia, in 1993, during a period when that town was controlled by AIAI, with no hint of authorities checking on their activities, is especially revealing. Indeed, the only anxiety expressed in publicly available al Qaeda communications is a complaint in 1993, during the worst moments of political crisis in Kenya, that “Kenya is not a good place. . . the cost of living is high, plus corruption is dangerously prevalent – there is theft, house break-ins, no political stability, and it is possible there will be an explosion in the country.”³⁰ These were identical worries for Kenyan citizens at the time as well.

Police corruption and incompetence in Kenya made the country all the more appealing for al Qaeda-affiliates. In several instances, top leaders in the East African cells were detained by Kenyan police only to either be released or escape. Former US Ambassador to Kenya, Johnnie Carson, recounts these missed opportunities:

It is widely believed that during his first arrest [use of stolen credit card, July 2002], Fazul succeeded in bribing low-level Kenyan police officers into setting him free, and that during his second arrest, improper police procedure and sheer incompetence (not thoroughly searching the two suspects)³¹ led to his escape. Sloppy police procedures also may have allowed Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan to escape on at least one occasion.³²

Even with reforms which are believed to have reduced corruption in the Kenyan police, Kenya’s security sector struggles to monitor much higher rates of international transactions in and out of Kenya than do neighboring countries. The fact that Kenya has played such a robust role as a safe haven compared to neighboring, stateless Somalia is significant, a reminder that ungoverned zones may be less attractive than weak states for certain terrorist activities.

Procurement of Weapons and Explosives

Terrorist attacks in the Horn of Africa have had little difficulty procuring weapons on the private market, in large part because the region is awash in small arms and more sophisticated arms.³³ Where special orders need to be placed, Mogadishu has been the most useful arms bazaar. The explosives and detonation devices used in the 1998 embassy bombings were mainly acquired in Somalia; the surface to air missiles used in the failed attempt to bring down the Israeli chartered plane in Mombasa in December 2002 were acquired in Mogadishu and transported overland to Kenya. It is worth noting however that both small arms and heavier weapons, including surface to air missiles, can be procured throughout the region. Orders can also be placed with international arms traffickers who fly weapons into remote landing strips undetected.³⁴

Smuggling of Men and Materiel

Some Horn of Africa ports of entry and borders are less porous than others. In some locations, there is virtually no capacity on the part of weak or collapsed states to effectively patrol their borders or even who enters the country by plane or ship. Somalia’s long coastline is almost entirely unpoliced, and hundreds of dhows and light boats come

and go freely from beaches and small harbors. The border areas of Somalia and Kenya have been extremely difficult to patrol, though Kenya has recently been making more vigorous attempts to control flows of people across the border. Goods and people generally move unimpeded (or pay a small bribe to police and customs officers) across most of the border areas in the Horn of Africa.

Terrorist cells based in Kenya have found Somalia to be especially useful for transshipment of goods and men. Somalia was used as a transshipment site in the 2002 terrorist attacks in Mombasa.

Establishment of Businesses or Charities for Cover and Income Generation

Kenya has been a preferred site for the operation of businesses and charities by terrorist cells in the Horn of Africa. Most Islamic charities in both Kenya and the broader region are entirely legitimate, but a handful have been misused by jihadist cells. The almost limitless amount of humanitarian crises in the region creates a natural attraction for charities and NGOs, most of which prefer to use Nairobi as a regional base for logistical and other reasons.

A number of businesses in Somalia, Sudan, and Kenya have been accused or suspected of having al Qaeda links. These range from small businesses like fishing enterprises designed mainly to provide a sleeper cell with a revenue flow and a pattern of movement between Kenya and Somalia that does not appear unusual, to larger firms which generate a revenue flow for al Qaeda. Much of the Horn of Africa relies on diaspora remittances, making remittance companies a critical part of the economy; these companies can unwittingly transfer funds for criminal and terrorist activities as well as legitimate enterprises. Likewise, most of the region depends on the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as a de facto financial and commercial capital, where businesses place orders, secure loans, and forge partnerships. In the course of these deals, some companies acquire business relations with al Qaeda-affiliated firms, either wittingly or unwittingly.

Conclusion

On paper, the Horn of Africa appears to be an ideal location for terrorist activities. Much of the region's territory qualifies as a zone of state failure, where central state authority is weak to non-existent and where terrorist cells can presumably operate with impunity. Where state authority is robust, it is generally experienced as a repressive and predatory force to be evaded or resisted, stoking deep resentments that erode the willingness of local communities to cooperate with counter-terrorist monitoring. Borders are porous and poorly patrolled throughout the Horn of Africa, fueling robust smuggling networks that facilitate cross-border terrorist and criminal operations. The Horn of Africa is one of the poorest and most underdeveloped regions of the world, and is also the site of multiple, protracted armed conflicts; the region's desperate poverty and militarization has the potential to produce a ready supply of recruits into terrorist cells.

Corruption is endemic in most regional governments, compromising the effectiveness of counter-terrorism operations by police and security forces.

In addition, the Horn of Africa also possesses a number of specific features which make it susceptible to the particular form of terror activity of special concern to the United States – namely, Islamic jihadism. Five of the region’s seven states are divided between Christian and Muslim communities, and as such constitute potentially fertile ground for sectarian tensions and religious extremism, especially in Kenya and Ethiopia, where Muslim populations have historically been politically marginalized.³⁵ Portions of the region – especially Kenya -- are rich in soft Western targets. Muslim communities throughout the region have been penetrated and resocialized by aggressive salafist missionary efforts from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, rendering the practice of Islam more radicalized in some quarters. Somalia’s prolonged period of state collapse has allowed salafist organizations to carve out strategically targeted niches in social services, businesses, and local government, providing a favorable network within which jihadists can operate. Large numbers of the region’s Muslim populations have traveled to the Gulf states to work or study, where they have been exposed to salafist interpretations of Islam. Throughout the region, post 9/11 government crack-downs on Islamic charities, remittance companies, and other organizations suspected of linkages to al Qaeda have been viewed by many Muslims as misguided, discriminatory, and anti-Islamic policies, and as such have stoked anti-American sentiment. Extensive and critical media coverage of the war in Iraq has fueled anti-Americanism still further. Because almost every government in the region is to varying degrees cooperating with the US in the war on terror, popular anger at repressive or unresponsive regional states is easily conflated with anti-Americanism.

Yet evidence of actual terrorist activities in the Horn of Africa points to the fact that the region has not been especially conducive to certain types of terrorist activities. Moreover, the region’s zones of complete state collapse – “ungoverned spaces” in the purest sense – are only attractive for a relatively limited number of terrorist activities. Many of the most important, substantial, and long-running terrorist activities in the Horn of Africa have either been situated where they enjoy state sponsorship (Sudan, circa 1991-96) or in a weak, multi-ethnic state (Kenya). Kenya was the principal site for multiple, major terrorist attacks, in part because it sports the greatest number of soft targets but also because it has porous borders, large, largely unpoliced, and multiethnic urban settings where foreign jihadists can go unnoticed, and a police force and service sector that historically has been quite corrupt. It is easy to imagine how al Qaeda operatives rented private light aircraft to fly them from Wilson airport in Nairobi to known radical Islamist centers in Somalia with no questions asked in Kenya; it is impossible to imagine that same scene at an Ethiopian airport. The ease with which foreign al Qaeda operatives set up shop in Kenya – from establishing charities or businesses to marrying into local families – contrasts sharply with the difficulties faced by al Qaeda operatives seeking safe haven in Somalia.

In the one instance when Islamist terrorist groups were given sponsorship by a state in the Horn of Africa (Sudan in 1991-96) their host government quickly found the

costs of sponsoring foreign terrorists too high and evicted them. The Sudan experience may have immediate relevance in Somalia, where the Union of Islamic Courts paid a heavy price for allowing a small number of radicals in its umbrella movement to provide safe haven for three or more foreign al Qaeda operatives wanted by the United States government for the 1998 embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. If and when Somali Islamists regain power in Somalia, the costs and benefits of sponsoring foreign terrorists will no doubt be weighed more carefully.

The Horn of Africa region's many ungoverned spaces are, it turns out, difficult and dangerous not only for international relief organizations but for international terrorists as well. There, logistics are a constant challenge; communication is poor; maintenance of health and access to clean water can be problematic; secrecy of movement is difficult because so few foreigners are present; conflicts over the movement's resources can become part of local tribal or clan conflicts; armed conflicts are endemic; and the threat of extortion, blackmail, and kidnapping is very real. Recently declassified and publicly available trip reports by foreign al Qaeda operatives hoping to establish a training base in remote areas of Somalia and eastern Ethiopia are litanies of complaints about lack of potable water, poor shelter, lousy food, biting flies, disease, and ungrateful, suspicious locals – not unlike what one would expect from the journal of a twenty-five year old aid worker sent out to his first post in the hinterlands of any Horn of Africa country.³⁶ Remote, ungoverned spaces are, in sum, “non-permissive” for everyone.

The actual number of foreign al Qaeda operatives using Somalia as a safe haven has remained quite small (though also quite dangerous) since the late 1990s, nowhere near as large as those suspected of residing in or transiting through Kenya. US government officials regularly cited concerns about no more than three to five al Qaeda suspects believed to be enjoying protection in Somalia. Where they did enjoy safe haven, these individuals opted to reside in Mogadishu, not remote rural areas. Interestingly, the largest build-up of foreign Islamic radicals in Mogadishu coincided not with the city's greatest period of anarchy, but rather with its greatest period of law and order – in 2006, when the UIC defeated the coalition of US backed militia leaders and imposed Islamic law on the city.

What terrorist activities are likely to occur in ungoverned zones? Somalia, as the most ungoverned of the “ungoverned spaces” in the Horn, did serve a critical niche role as a major source of weapons, including surface to air missiles, for terrorist attacks in Kenya. Importantly, procurement and smuggling of weapons into Kenya did not require a committed local partner of al Qaeda. Any and all local businessmen are happy to sell weapons and transport them. Somalia also served as a convenient transit point for al Qaeda figures who moved between Somalia and Kenya by boat, overland, or flight. When actively sought by US and Kenyan authorities in Kenya, al Qaeda operatives often opted to flee to Somalia, where they were generally – though not always – beyond the reach of the law.

Terrorist training centers also tend to be based in ungoverned spaces, with the notable exception of the state-sponsored training camps in Sudan. But even where no state existed, al Qaeda affiliates required the patronage and protection of some local authority to establish and operate a camp. Setting up shop without that local protection would have been too risky in Somalia.

Ungoverned spaces in the Horn also provide unscrupulous charities with the opportunity to operate with little accountability about how funds are spent. This is a problem that reaches far beyond Islamic charities, but is especially problematic if a relief agency is used as a front for terrorist activities.

Political assassinations by jihadists also occurred disproportionately in ungoverned zones of the Horn of Africa, especially Somalia. Nowhere else are political rivals to jihadist routinely targeted; nowhere else have international aid workers been the targets of so many fatal attacks. This suggests that targeted attacks on individuals is less risky in areas where rule of law is non-existent, and assassins can act with impunity – especially if they have succeeded in effectively intimidating local authorities. The impressive non-state systems of governance in ungoverned zones are poorly equipped to stand up against trained and committed jihadi killers, even those in their own tribe or lineage.

Garrison states in the Horn – especially Ethiopia’s presence in portions of its troubled frontier – appear to have been relatively successful in raising the risks too high for aspiring al Qaeda cells to maintain a presence inside their borders. In the long-run, however, repressive policing may actually fuel extremism and sympathies toward terrorist movements.

Recruitment patterns present an unexpected pattern. Despite extremely high levels of unemployment and armed violence in zones of state collapse in the Horn, those zones tended to produce fewer recruits into al Qaeda affiliated groups than did areas of at least modestly effective governance.

Beyond the specific findings gleaned from an examination of Islamic terrorism in the Horn of Africa, this study also demonstrates the utility of disaggregating both the notion of “ungoverned space” and the broad rubric of “terrorist activities.” There are important variations in ungoverned spaces, some of which are more conducive to terrorist activities than others. Likewise, by breaking down the terrorist portfolio into a range of discrete activities (from actual attacks to training camps to safe havens), we are better able to see how jihadist cells prefer to conduct certain types of activities in certain political settings. If afforded a range of security and governance environments, terrorist cells will seek to exploit the “comparative advantage” that each context offers. The Horn of Africa case also help to reinforce the argument that risk assessments of terrorist threats are better served by taking a regional rather than country-based approach to the subject, since terrorist cells do not confine themselves to a single country but seek to exploit regional opportunities to conduct their operations.

Finally, the observations made in this study point to a troubling feature of state-building enterprises in collapsed states like Somalia. The shift from collapsed state to fully functional central government – one which can provide an enabling environment for development, public security for its citizens, and a security sector which can monitor and prevent terrorist activities – necessarily involves a long transitional period during which the state is no longer a zone of complete collapse, but one which presents many of the features of a weak state. Given what we think we know about how terrorist organizations exploit different types of political environments for different purposes, the transition catalyzed by state-building efforts may actually render the state more vulnerable to certain types of terrorist activities even as it renders it less vulnerable to others. This can include the prospect of terrorist cells infiltrating key institutions within nascent governments.

NOTES

¹ Commission on Weak States and US National Security, “On the Brink: Weak States and US National Security,” (Washington DC: Center for Global Development, 2004, p. 1.

² The White House, “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, September 2002, preface.

³ Karen de Young, “World Bank Lists Failing Nations that Can Breed Global Terrorism,” *Washington Post* (September 15 2006), p. A13.

⁴ The Horn of Africa is an imprecise geographic designation. For the purposes of this study, the Horn of Africa includes the seven member-states in the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) – Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, and Uganda.

⁵ Fieldwork conducted by the author in the region since 1998 included consultancies for UNDP, USAID, Small Arms Survey, Development Alternatives Inc., and International Crisis Group, as well as a research grant from the US Institute of Peace. The views expressed in this paper reflect only those of the author. The Harmony Project is a recent declassification of al Qaeda and other documents seized by the US government in Afghanistan and Iraq; the translated and original documents are posted on the project website as they are released. See http://www.ctc.usma.edu/aq_harmonylist.asp.

⁶ See Theresa Whelan, “Africa’s Ungoverned Space – A New Threat Paradigm,” paper delivered at the conference “Rethinking the Future Nature of Competitions and Conflict,” (19 December 2005), P. 2.

⁷ Ken Menkhaus, “State Collapse in Somalia: Second Thoughts,” *Review of African Political Economy* vol. 30, no. 97 (September 2003), pp. 405-422.

⁸ See Joe Mullen, “Traditional Authorities and Local Governance in Post CPA Southern Sudan,” UNDP, Rumbek, June 2005; and UNDP, Local Government Secretariat, “Traditional Authority in South Sudan,” Khartoum, March 2005.

⁹ See Dekha Ibrahim and J. Jenner, “Wajir Community-Based Conflict Management,” Paper presented to the USAID Conference on Conflict Resolution in the Greater Horn of Africa, June 1997; and Ken Menkhaus, “Kenya-Somalia Border Conflict Analysis,” Nairobi: Development Alternatives Inc, for USAID, August 2005.

¹⁰ For a period of time in the early to mid 1990s, the government of Sudan played host to numerous leaders and groups from outside the Horn of Africa considered by the United States to be terrorists, including Abu Nidal, Islamic Jihad, Hamas, Hezbollah, and a host of individual terror suspects from North Africa. Some, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, continue to enjoy access to Khartoum; the government of Sudan argues that they are not

terrorist fronts. This inventory is derived from Robert Rotberg, ed., *Battling Terrorism in the Horn of Africa* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

¹¹ The precise relationship between the East Africa cells which conducted these attacks and al Qaeda is the subject of debate; the increasingly decentralized nature of jihadist networks makes it increasingly difficult to attribute incidents simply to “al Qaeda.” Here the term al Qaeda-affiliated” is used.

¹² In addition, two major al Qaeda terrorist attacks took place just beyond the Horn of Africa in Yemen, the maritime attacks on the USS Cole and the French tanker Limburg.

¹³ International Crisis Group, “Counter-Terrorism in Somalia: Losing Hearts and Minds?” Africa Report no. 95 (11 July 2005), p. 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Anneli Botha, “Relationship between Africa and International Terrorism: Causes and Linkages,” Paper Prepared for the conference on Southern Africa and International Terrorism, Tswalu South Africa (25-27 January 2007), p. 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁸ Testimony (in broken English) of Jamal Ahmed Mohamed al-Fadl, describing the 1993 trip report of al Qaeda operative Abu Hafs after returning to Kenya from Somalia. “USA vs Osama bin Laden,” Day Four (13 Feb. 2001), <http://cryptome.org/usa-v-ubl-dt.htm>.

¹⁹ One other terrorist attack – the 1993 World Trade Center bombing in New York – may have links to the Horn of Africa. Elements within the Sudanese government may have aided and abetted the terrorists implicated in that bombing. See Tim Carney, “The Sudan: Political Islam and Terrorism,” in Rotberg, ed. *Battling Terrorism in the Horn of Africa*, p. 124.

²⁰ International Crisis Group, “Counter-Terrorism in Somalia: Losing Hearts and Minds?” pp. 5-7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²² Carney, “The Sudan,” p. 122.

²³ Andrew MacGregor, “Khartoum’s Murdered Journalist: A Casualty in Islam’s Theological Civil War,” *Global Terrorism Analysis*, Jamestown Foundation, vol. 3, issue 36 (19 September 2006).

²⁴ Quoted in Carney, “The Sudan,” p. 125.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ International Crisis Group, “Can the Somali Crisis be Contained?” Africa Report no. 116 (10 August 2006), p. 10.

²⁷ Miscellaneous Harmony Project documents.

²⁸ International Crisis Group, “Counter-Terrorism in Somalia: Losing Hearts and Minds?” p. 9.

²⁹ Translation of a message from the Iraqi Intelligence Service to the Iraqi Embassy in Djibouti, circa 2001, Harmony Project ISGQ-2005-00024493.

³⁰ Translation of Al Qaeda report, circa 1993, Harmony Project, AFGP -2002-800597.

³¹ One al Qaeda suspect in the Paradise Hotel bombing exploded a concealed hand grenade while in custody, allowing Fazul to escape.

³² Johnnie Carson, “Kenya: The Struggle Against Terrorism,” in Rotberg., ed., *Battling Terrorism in the Horn of Africa*, p. 184.

³³ For data on regional arms flows, see Small Arms Survey, “Sudan: Arms Flows,” Issue Brief no. 4 (forthcoming February 2006).

³⁴ A total of 455 airstrips and runways exist in Sudan and its immediate border areas; see *Ibid.*

³⁵ Of the seven IGAD member states, only two – Somalia and Djibouti – are almost exclusively populated by one faith group.

³⁶ Translation of “The Ogaden File: The Meritorious Journey,” 1993, Harmony Project, AFGP-2002-600104.