

Where terrorists hide

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Undated photo released on the Internet by al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb showing training and work of al-Qaida groups in Algeria. The Internet allows terrorist groups to operate in virtual havens, which are highly mobile and difficult to track or to control, as they are not based in any particular physical location. (Photo by Balkis Press/ABACAUSA via Newscom)

The just released Country Report on Terrorism 2007 by the U.S. State Department outlines a number of areas that serve as safe havens for terrorists. But first it would be useful to delineate what qualifies as a safe haven.

According to the State Department, terrorist safe havens are defined "as ungoverned, under-governed, or ill-governed areas of a country and non-physical areas where terrorists that constitute a threat to U.S. national security interests are able to organize, plan, raise funds, communicate, recruit, train, and operate in relative security because of inadequate governance capacity, political will, or both. Physical safe havens provide security for terrorist leaders, allowing them to plan acts of terrorism around the world."

The Internet plays a major role in facilitating communication between terrorist organizations. It also helps them disseminate propaganda and misinformation without having the need of a physical safe haven, allowing terrorist groups to operate in virtual havens which are highly mobile, difficult to track or to control, as they are not based in any particular physical entity.

The physical safe havens used by terrorists today include Somalia, in the Horn of Africa, where a small number of al-Qaida operatives pose a serious threat to U.S. and allied interests in the region. Despite being disrupted by the Ethiopian military intervention in neighboring Somalia al-Qaida continues to operate in Somalia and elsewhere in East Africa. A major concern is Somalia's proximity to the Arabian Peninsula.

The Trans-Sahara, much like Somalia, offers terrorists an ideal safe haven due to its remoteness, lack of government control and long and porous borders. These are all found in the areas of the Sahel and Maghreb regions in Africa. The merger in 2007 of the Algeria-based al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM, and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), increased the threat to U.S. interests from Islamic extremists.

AQIM has used the remoteness of the Sahel to train its militants in small arms, use of explosives, and guerrilla tactics for the last several years, according to the U.S. State Department report.

The Middle East

The U.S. State Department does not consider Iraq to be a current safe haven for terrorists, although it points out that a large number of terrorists are currently operating from Iraq. They include both Sunnis and Shiite extremists; among them are al-Qaida in Iraq, Ansar al-Islam, and Ansar al-Sunna. Additionally, there are Kurdish groups operating in the northern part of the country such as the Kurdistan Worker's Party, or the PKK, who maintain an active presence in northern Iraq, from where they receive tacit support from their Iraqi brethren and periodically launch attacks into Turkey, targeting security forces and local officials.

Lebanon

The U.S. State Department considers Hezbollah as "the most prominent and powerful terrorist group in Lebanon." Designated by the United States as a "Foreign Terrorist Organization," Hezbollah, is recognized by the Lebanese government as a legitimate "resistance group" and political party. The party's strong influence among Lebanon's large Shiite community offers the group multiple safe havens throughout the country; from Beirut's southern suburbs to the south of the country.

The State Department report claims that "an increasing number of al-Qaida-associated Sunni extremists are also operating within the country. Al-Qaida likely views Lebanon as an opportunity to expand its jihad into the Levant, especially after the 2006 conflict between Israel and Hezbollah." The

Lebanese Shiite organization uses the Palestinian refugee camps as staging grounds for recruitment, training, planning, and facilitating transit of foreign fighters to and from Iraq.

Yemen

Yemen, a country where the central government has historically faced difficulty exerting its authority beyond the confines of the capital city has offered terrorists an ideal safe haven.

Yemen suffered a number of setbacks in its fight to curb terrorism; among the setbacks was the June 22, 2007 announcement that Abu Basir Nasir al-Wahishi was the new head of al-Qaida in Yemen (AQY). At the end of 2007, the government of Yemen could not account for seven of the 23 al-Qaida members that escaped from a prison in Sanaa in February 2006. Al-Qaida-Yemen carried out several attacks against tourism targets, most notably the January and July 2007 attacks against foreign visitors to the Queen of Sheba Temple in Marib and the country's oil infrastructure.

And of course is the ever porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, where despite efforts of both countries' security forces, "instability along the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier appeared to have provided al-Qaida leadership greater mobility and ability to conduct training and operational planning, particularly that targeting Western Europe and the United States."

One certainty that emerges from the latest edition of the Country Report on Terrorism is that sheer military might alone will not solve what has become a global scourge. What appears to be missing is a large-scale coordinated political and cultural effort to address this growing problem.