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Rewired For War: Militant Operating Environments

By *SWJ Editors*

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Rewired For War: Militant Operating Environments

By Michael Innes, [Cross Post from CT Lab](#)

I just came out of a conversation with an editor at a major magazine, in which I was embarrassingly incapable of intelligently relating my own alleged expertise on insurgent and terrorist sanctuaries to an open discussion that just threaded its way through the blogosphere over the last few days. The conversation forced me to think hard about what my issues were with the debate, which earned said editor an acknowledgment whenever I get my damn book on the subject written. What initiated all of this was Andrew Exum's (a.k.a. [Abu Muqawama](#)) short article entitled "[No Place To Hide](#)" in *The New Republic*. Ex made a lot of smart points about safe havens, and as I wrote in an email to him, it's good that he's addressed this publicly and sparked some straight thinking. No one has seriously addressed the problem of militant sanctuaries in years -- really, not since the post-9/11 Bush Administration's first term, when it was still all about hunting down Al Qaeda honchos and "smoking them out of their holes."

Unfortunately, Ex's write-up, which took the Obama Administration's new policy on Afghanistan and Pakistan to task for its "obsession" with physical sanctuary (among other things), was also heavily flawed, for reasons I'll get into below. I've always maintained that most of the policy on denying sanctuary to terrorists has been distracted and partisan, and the scholarly literature, with few exceptions, too misguided or constrained by disciplinary stovepipes to be useful. Likewise any popular understanding of what havens, much less the safe kind, actually mean. All sorts of aphorisms and buzzwords have been bandied about, without much consideration to whether they actually apply to the specifics we have to deal with in Afghanistan, Iraq, and a few other trouble spots. I'm highly skeptical, for example, that slapping some pomo jargon or sexed-up architectural theory on the problem will help fix things. I'm equally skeptical that a classical COIN model of sanctuary can be faithfully applied to transnational terror groups without some sort of adaptation.

I want to pursue the theme during this symposium, partly because I think sanctuary in militant thought and practice - particularly in this age of cybernetic and chaotic warfare - is at the heart of battlespace regulatory regimes (be they social, legal, or technological). In this, I'd like to push Antoine and Rex in particular to respond (though all are obviously welcome to weigh in). Both, to my mind, have distinct expertise that's relevant here - Antoine on how military managers think about the shape and order of battlespace, and Rex on how a militant organization can exploit the cracks and seams in such systems in order to survive.

Back to Exum's article. There's a lot that's good about it: there's more to safe havens than just the physical

dimension; virtual issues need to be dealt with; safe havens have been part and parcel of both COIN and CT missions; and we need to look beyond the Afghanistan/Pakistan horizon to what's next. All sensible points, and I don't have any serious disagreement with his general thrust. For [Matthew Yglesias](#), one take away - quite incorrectly - was that terrorists don't even need a sanctuary. An anonymous commenter observed at Exum's blog that it was next to impossible to see the army for all the straw men populating it. I'll try to address as many of these points as possible in this post. They don't necessarily weave well into a whole, so I'll just deal with them in a sort of stream of consciousness, and try to avoid rambling.

Although terrorists plan and train in the real world, Exum writes, the "common denominator that has emerged from domestic terror threats in places like the United Kingdom is that their staging ground was actually on the internet rather than in a physical 'safe haven'." I'm pretty confident he wasn't trying to paint a picture of wetwired ji-hackers uploading themselves into the net to wreak digital havoc in ethereal form, and he later redressed the editorial misstep that led him referencing the internet per se, rather than web-based propaganda. It's important to acknowledge the role of web technologies and social media as idea-sharing platforms, but the point is frequently -- and easily -- overstated or miscommunicated.

[Thomas Hegghammer](#), for example, in response to No Place to Hide, noted that "at the end of the day, the Internet is just the messenger." Well, no, no it's not. It's a vehicle, nothing more, unless you consider the stratcom implications of the message being in the medium - but even so, the messenger as active agent is a third party to all this. Perhaps, in a rewired-for-war robotics sense, the Internet could become the messenger at some point down the road, but that's a distracted aside.

People communicate through the web, and learn from resources hosted on it, and sometimes that communication and learning can lead down the road to extremism. But those features doesn't really make the web any more an "operating environment" or "staging ground" than text messaging, the radio, or the local library. As Tim Stevens put it in his response to Exum, there's a "rather insidious tendency amongst the security establishment to parse the virtual/physical relationship clumsily, many people preferring to focus on one at the expense of the other."

The point about terrorist use of the internet that's consistently glossed over is that it's just as "physical" a resource as training camps in Waziristan, cave complexes in Tora Bora, or safe houses in London. It's anchored in real world hardware and it takes real people to interface with it -- but it's organized, distributed, and accessed in ways that don't look anything like the macro territorial havens we're used to thinking about. The distributed internet is, essentially, a reflection of the transnational networks that exploit the medium. To borrow from Hegghammer, they are the messengers, riding its ruby rails.

That's the difference: physical space can be organized in many different ways, and different kinds of organizations have differing requirements. Guerrilla field armies need controllable territory to go about their business, but transnational networks made of up of linked individuals don't. They need physical space, to be sure; that's not the same thing as territory, in its political sense. So when Ex argues that the new White House policy "betrays an obsession with physical space at the expense of virtual space," it's a fair point, but it misses a more important one: destroy a guerrilla sanctuary, and you may soon have to contend with the networked kind -- small, scattered, more of them, harder to find.

I don't mean to suggest that the world of ideas doesn't count or is even necessarily subsidiary here. I'm in full agreement with Rex Brynen's comment on No Place to Hide: "There are two issues here. The first is the importance of the net for propagandizing and recruitment, which I don't doubt. The second, however, is the extent to which havens may be socially constructed rather than (or as well as being) spatially determined." There's an important corollary argument, for example, in the Orwellian relationship that old school jihadis have with "safe" havens. Some of the early cohort of Afghanistan's anti-Soviet fighters, for example, had been on the run from persecution in their home countries: Osama bin Laden from Saudi

authorities, and Al Qaeda no. 2 Ayman Al Zawahiri was a 1970s Egyptian dissident who went on to volunteer his medical skills to the mujahedin in the 1980s. So in a limited sense, they were "safe" in Afghanistan and Pakistan, at least from Egyptian and Saudi lock-up. Zawahiri's own writings suggest that what we think of as sanctuary - conventionally, a protected rear area - AQ considers to be front line. The key here is that professional jihadis have consistently sought out the next battlefield, the next arena of jihad, and some of the same names pop up in the wars in Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chechnya, and so on. The safety they're looking for has never been physical, by any stretch of the imagination. It's spiritual, a sort of preservation of the faith, and it's the kind of connection that's enabled repeated link-ups between transnational networks and local armies.

So where does that leave us? Echoing **Antoine Bousquet's writing** on closed worlds and cyberneticism, **Yglesias writes** "You need to be wary of a strategic concept which implies that the security of American citizens requires the United States to achieve effective physical control over 100 percent of the world's land area." This has some bearing on what the White House should reasonably be trying to achieve. Its obsession, Ex argues, is a direct legacy of the Clinton era. He writes: " The policy-makers who crafted the White House strategy largely belong to the generation that cut its teeth in the Clinton White House, when physical havens were in fact the only havens that mattered." That's not exactly accurate. Yes, the Clinton Administration dealt with terrorists holed up in miserable parts of the world. But to the extent that anyone was thinking about "safe havens" or "sanctuaries", it had very little to do with the terrorist variety. In the 1990s, "safe havens" were a **completely different kind of political football**. The liberal internationalism of that era was preoccupied with the plight of civilians caught in the crossfires of nasty little wars. It established UN safe cities in Bosnia, France's humanitarian enclave in 1994 Rwanda during the genocide, and implemented no-fly zones over Kurdish Iraq. These were a sort of variation on an extraterritorial theme, of the kind of middle ground in international relations that allows for **state neutrality**, among other things. One might argue, based on that legacy, that acknowledging shades of intermediacy in foreign relations is exactly the recipe driving Obama's rapprochement with the world - the kind of middle-ground-enabling philosophy that can allow for finer grained differentiations in COIN and CT operations and leverage greater opportunities for diplomatic engagement.

About the Author



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