State neglect fosters global illicitly-governed spaces

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Spaces where armed groups are equally, or more present than the state often tend to go unnoticed unless they garner media attention with high-profile violence. There, such groups exert authority over local populations and engage in illegal business activities. These operations allow them to accumulate power and resources potentially to stage attacks elsewhere. Targeting these spaces and restoring legitimate governance are necessary to deprive armed groups of social support and end illegal businesses.

Policemen take position during an operation in the Mare slums complex in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Reuters/Ricardo Moraes)

What next

The ability of non-state groups to exercise authority and provide governance functions allows them to gain support, attract recruits and raise income to strengthen their organisational structure and potentially implement attacks. Identifying illicitly-governed regions and providing effective governance there would help curb transnational organised crime and terrorism at its root rather than combating its symptoms.

Analysis

A variety of armed non-state groups exert control over civilians, including:

l religiously motivated groups, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan and Islamic State group (ISG) in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt;

l ethnically motivated groups, such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines;

l ideologically motivated groups, such as the Maoists in India; and

l economically motivated groups, such as drug cartels in Mexico.

These groups often engage in transnational organised crime, such as antiquities smuggling in Syria and Iraq, piracy off Somalia and heroin trade in Afghanistan, to combine governance with illegal activities (see IRAQ/SYRIA: Islamic State government will endure - March 19, 2015).

Illicitly-governed regions

Armed groups gain local populations' support by exerting governance functions. They provide basic services, such as healthcare, roads and education. They set up justice systems and provide local security. They also offer economic opportunities, often related to illegal businesses, such as smuggling, money laundering or the drug industry.

Illicitly-governed regions exist across the globe.

Drug gangs control entire neighbourhoods in the favelas of Brazil's Rio de Janeiro and in the shanty towns of South Africa's Johannesburg (see BRAZIL: Anti-crime measures aim to boost Rio tourism - November 22, 2011). They keep levels of violence low and are respected as protectors by the local communities.

Impact

l Providing basic goods and services would help authorities regain legitimacy in illicitly-governed regions.

l However, cracking down on illicit activities, such as smuggling, could deprive some communities of their only source of income.

l Economic aid and development would, therefore, need to accompany any such clampdowns.

In the department of Putumayo in Southern Colombia, the rebel group FARC has built roads and health centres, and offers jobs in coca plantations, required to produce cocaine.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah regulates civilian life for the Shia community and compensates for the weakness of central government, particularly in terms of social services and welfare.

These armed groups can also produce soaring rates of violence, sudden high-profile attacks, human displacement and general suffering. The June 26 ISG-claimed attack in Tunisia, which left 38 tourists dead and which was probably organised in Libya, illustrates that these groups can easily spread across borders and jeopardise international peace and security.

Basing decisions on the level or profile of violence creates reactive policies instead of preventative ones

Implications

Focusing on these regions only when homicide rates rise and the numbers of mass displacements multiply has several implications:

Loss of legitimacy

Without the ability to provide services, security, infrastructure or justice, national government and local authorities lose the local population's support, and subsequently their claim to be legitimate.

By contrast, the armed non-state groups are socially recognised because they provide governance functions necessary to regulate everyday life.

They most easily do so in regions where the state is absent or corroded by corruption -- in the latter, corrupt government elites often collude with those armed groups -- and where the international community does not show great interest in local dynamics.

Local governments in affected countries lose legitimacy because non-state actors provide the services authorities should

Neglecting these spaces when there is no high-profile violence, therefore, allows these groups to consolidate their power and foster local support.

Alienation of the local population

Authorities often further alienate local populations when they attempt to regain control of these areas. Typically, severe violence only erupts when the state and the international community return.

In many regions in Afghanistan, people feel they lived better under the Taliban than when the international community intervened because they knew whose rules to follow.

In Colombia, during decades under the rule of the insurgents in certain regions, there was order. Yet when state forces came in to take control over the territory and fight back the insurgents, violent clashes did not bring freedom but more violence and stigmatisation.

Illicit economy

Illicitly-governed regions feature a distinct political economy, stimulated and maintained by illegal economic activities.

Illicit mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central Africa Republic, poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, cocaine trade in the Andes, ISG's oil trade in Syria, and smuggling in Egypt's Sinai and the Sahara-Sahel are lucrative income sources for non-state groups (see WEST AFRICA: Militancy focus masks Sahara-Sahel trade - March 22, 2013).

In the absence of more gainful licit jobs, there is little incentive for local community members to participate in the legal economy.

Transnational organised crime

The ability to govern a certain territory and the people residing in it contributes to global crime (see INTERNATIONAL: Ukraine crisis will transform crime - October 9, 2014).

For drug cartels, it means they can regulate the narcotics that enter and leave their territory without being disturbed by the authorities.

In North Africa, armed groups can benefit from people smuggling, being able to channel people across regions more or less freely (see INTERNATIONAL: Migrant surge refines people-smuggling - May 15, 2015).

Insurgents can increase their income through illegal economic activities. This pays for weapons, ammunitions and other supplies that sustain their fighting in other regions where they lack local support or have to countervail state forces' resistance.

Terrorism

Illicitly-governed regions are not only a matter of local concern. In these apparently tranquil regions, groups can organise, recruit, and plan attacks to kill civilians.

However, terror tactics do not have an inherent appeal to illicit groups. Often, it is the potential for over-reaction by state agencies in countering them that proves the most important variable capable of exacerbating the longer-term risk of potentially violent radicalisation (see EGYPT: Sinai counter-insurgency risks backfiring - November 4, 2014).

Heavy-handed security campaigns often exacerbate radicalisation