

Ungoverned Areas and Threats from Safe Havens*

Executive Summary

Individuals and groups who use violence in ways that threaten the United States, its allies, or its partners habitually find or create ways to operate with impunity or without detection. Whether for private financial gain (e.g., by narcotics and arms traffickers) or for harmful political aims (e.g., by insurgents, terrorists, and other violent extremists), these illicit operations are most successful — and most dangerous — when their perpetrators have a place or situation that can provide refuge from efforts to combat or counter them. Such places and situations are often called *safe havens*, and potential safe havens are sometimes called *ungoverned areas*.

- A key component of counterinsurgency (COIN), counterterrorism (CT), counternarcotics (CN), stabilization and reconstruction, peace operations, and other such efforts is to reduce the size and effectiveness of an illicit actor's safe haven.
- Agencies in defense, diplomacy, development, law enforcement, and other fields all have capabilities that can be applied to countering such threats and to building the capacity and legitimacy of U.S. partners to prevent ungoverned, under-governed, misgoverned, contested, and exploitable areas from becoming safe havens.

Effectively countering threats from ungoverned areas and safe havens (UGA/SH) requires careful consideration of geographical, political, civil, and resource factors that make safe havens possible. This report offers a framework that can be used to systematically account for these considerations in relevant strategies, capabilities, and doctrines/best practices, or to facilitate collaboration among U.S. government (USG) components that address UGA/SH problems — whether operating openly, discreetly, or covertly — to ensure unity of effort.

Main Findings

1. Governance. Safe havens emerge not only in ungoverned areas but in a broad range of environments where people and governments are unable or unwilling to stop illicit actors from exploiting local conditions and resources to operate with impunity: weakly governed societies have governance gaps that can give freedom of action to illicit actors, but some highly governed societies have legal protections that give freedom of action to everybody, while other highly governed societies provide freedom of action to certain illicit actors as a matter of policy. Analyzing and countering safe havens in any of these environments requires interagency attention to a broad range of geographical, political, civil, and resource considerations that are relevant locally. The full report discusses these considerations at length.

2. Building partnership capacity. Capacity-building, as a strategy to address safe havens, is most effective when it is done in a way that not only enhances our partners' capacity to govern, but also enhances their legitimacy to act on behalf of the people the illicit actors exploit. Likewise, targeting the capacity of illicit actors is most effective when it supports efforts to undermine their legitimacy with key populations. Building the legitimacy of partners and targeting the legitimacy of adversaries should be central concerns of U.S. efforts to address safe haven problems in all regions of the world.

* This report was prepared for the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (OUSD(P)) as the final report of the Ungoverned Areas Project, which was managed by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Policy Planning. The content reflects input, directly or indirectly, from a series of interagency workshops, individual consultations with USG offices, reviews of scholarly research, and participation in interagency working groups.

3. Unity of effort. Criminals, insurgents, terrorists, and warlords increasingly borrow each other's tactics, buy each other's services, and exploit each other's missions. By contrast, U.S. counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, counternarcotics, stability, and peace operations are not yet fully benefiting from each other's capabilities and doctrines for countering such actors' safe havens — even though programs and strategies for addressing one type of illicit actor are relevant, and often applicable, to programs and strategies for addressing other types. The UGA/SH framework provides a checklist of issues that should be accounted for in *any* effort to address safe havens problems. It can be used to organize a dialogue among the relevant USG offices about best practices for addressing this shared challenge.

The Ungoverned Areas/Safe Havens (UGA/SH) Framework

The UGA/SH framework offered in this report was developed in collaboration with interested offices throughout the Department of Defense (DoD) and the USG. It is not intended to replace or supersede existing frameworks and tools, but is intended as a supplement, to be used:

- in the field, to systematically identify the full range of issues that might affect or be affected by efforts to address specific safe haven problems;
- at headquarters, to systematically account for these issues when developing relevant strategies, capabilities, or doctrines/best practices; or
- at all levels, to facilitate collaboration among offices and units that address UGA/SH problems — whether openly, discreetly, or covertly — to ensure unity of effort.

The UGA/SH framework includes definitions for key terms (Section 1.1: What are safe havens?) and typologies (Section 1.2. What forms do safe havens take?) for safe havens and potential safe havens. The core of the framework, however, comprises the following sections:

Section 1.3. What makes safe havens possible?

1.3.1. Geographical considerations: What areas could be used for safe haven? The physical and human geography of any particular safe haven defines the basic operational environment for the effort to address the problem. This section discusses key characteristics of safe havens in remote, urban, maritime, and “virtual” environments.

1.3.2. Political considerations: How is this area governed? The *amount* of governance in an area (Is it “ungoverned”?) matters less to the emergence of a safe haven than the *way* the area is governed: inadequate political will to counter illicit actors, inadequate governance capacity (in intelligence, security, law, justice, economics, and essential services), and the presence of conflicts or crises all can provide specific benefits to illicit actors seeking haven there.

1.3.3. Civil considerations: How hospitable is the local population? Good information about illicit actors is often difficult to acquire from a population that has political or social grievances against the government, or ethnic, linguistic, cultural, ideological, or religious affinities to the illicit actors. Addressing key grievances, legitimacy gaps, and other interests has been shown to be a useful strategy for winning a local population's assistance.

1.3.4. Resource considerations: What is available to facilitate illicit operations? Illicit actors require personnel, funds, communication and transportation infrastructure, and weapons to make operating in a safe haven practical. These resources can be targeted as part of an overall strategy that accounts for the other considerations as well.

Section 1.4. What makes a safe haven problematic to U.S. security?

Some safe havens will inevitably be more of a priority for U.S. action and funding than others, depending on a variety of considerations: foreign policy, military operations, weapons of mass destruction, the presence of transnational illicit actors with projection capabilities or partnerships that act as force multipliers, natural resources, public opinion, foreign influence, proximity to the U.S. homeland, and the susceptibility of the problem to U.S. action.

Recommendations

1. Share doctrine and capability for addressing UGA/SH problems. Most CT, CN, COIN, stability, and peace operations affect or are affected by safe havens. Each of these fields has doctrine to address the relevant issues; all could benefit from a shared understanding of each other's best practices. Doctrine reviews conducted for irregular warfare and "complex operations" should continue to be encouraged and supported. However, no USG-wide doctrine exists for UGA/SH; in fact, no *mechanism* exists for establishing USG-wide doctrine at all.

2. Use the UGA/SH framework to inform relevant strategies. The UGA/SH framework integrates some of the best USG thinking about what UGA/SH are, what forms they take, what conditions can generate or sustain them, and why the USG might be interested in them. This framework could be used to inform how DoD and the USG address UGA/SH when developing or revising doctrines, guidance, planning scenarios, plans, and directives.

3. Use the UGA/SH framework to inform relevant assessments. An assessment of any problem is incomplete if it fails to account for all of the conditions that give rise to the problem and for the complex interactions among those conditions. Safe havens are a problem for defense, diplomacy, development, law enforcement, and other efforts. The assessments that inform work in those fields should account for all of the conditions discussed in the UGA/SH framework.

4. Sharpen the focus of UGA/SH research. The full report mentions nine topics that require further study: (1) urban, (2) maritime, and (3) virtual havens; (4) safe havens with features of multiple types (e.g., port cities as "urban maritime" havens); (5) interactions among the enabling conditions for safe havens (e.g., UGA/SH as complex systems); (6) understanding and influencing populations (e.g., culture, politics) in complex environments (including options for a more unified USG approach to information effects); (7) influencing political will; (8) options for improving the USG's capacity for capacity-building; and (9) alternatives to capacity-building (e.g., legitimacy-building) as a strategy for UGA/SH.

5. Require 'geo-referencing' in data collection. Ungoverned areas are complex operating environments. Safe havens emerge from complex sets of conditions that interact in unpredictable ways. Geographers who map complex environments, and social scientists who analyze complex systems and social networks, require good-quality data. When the data they have are not "georeferenced" (location-specific) or not available as "microdata" (data about individuals, households, or other small units), their analytic techniques cannot be used to their full potential. If analysts had more and better (validated, accurate) georeferenced microdata, policy makers would benefit from better mapping, early warning, and tactical intelligence.