

TERRORIST SANCTUARY IN THE SAHARA: A CASE STUDY

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Denying terrorists sanctuary has become a pillar of U.S. defense strategy since the September 11, 2001 (9/11) attacks. Violent extremist organizations in North Africa, such as the group al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—an Islamist militant organization founded in Algeria with the objective to overthrow the Algerian government and institute an Islamic state—have used remote and sparsely populated areas in the Sahara for protection from security forces to conduct a range of terrorist activities, such as training, planning, and logistics. Despite the time elapsed since the 9/11 attacks, and the resources dedicated to denying sanctuary globally, the concept of sanctuary remains largely unexplored and poorly understood. This monograph proposes a functional understanding of sanctuary and offers fresh ideas to deny it using a detailed case study of the most notorious of these North African terrorists, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, from his arrival in Mali in the late 1990s, until the French intervention in early 2013. This interdisciplinary inquiry uses a wide range of open-source documents, as well as anthropological, sociological, and political science research, including interviews with a former Belmokhtar hostage, Ambassador Robert Fowler, to construct a picture of what a day in the life of a Saharan sanctuary-seeking terrorist is like in order to provide further insight into terrorist sanctuary and explore ways and means to deny or control it.

There are various actors involved in sanctuary, and understanding those actors and their relationships is central to a developing a method to deny sanctuary. There are those who own the space, sanctuary providers or owners, and those who seek to gain from providing the space, rent-seekers or landlords. The owners who control the space may not necessarily be the same as the landlords who are seeking rents to administer the space. The owners of the sanctuary in the region being examined are the pastoral

families who live in these areas. Rent-seekers, or landlords, whether chiefs, criminal kingpins, or political appointees from the government, are often imposed upon the owners. Finally, sanctuary-seekers require the space and are usually those paying for using it. While those using sanctuary may not necessarily be the same as those who are paying, evidence indicates Belmokhtar funded his sanctuary—a tenant who paid his own bills.

Geography and people matter. Terrorists, criminals, and insurgents use remote places in the Sahara because it offers protection. The operational effects of the size, scale, and diversity of Saharan geography cannot be overstated. Military operations across this vast expanse realize many elements of the failed Desert One rescue attempt in Iran: sandstorms, temperature, distance, communication, security, and interaction with local population. While the geography of this region is imposing, people matter more. Those in the Sahara live a difficult life but have a very keen sense of history, understanding of the terrain, and pride in their identity. Importantly, Saharan society is not inherently compatible with Wahhabism, Salafism, and fundamentalist Islam. Quite the opposite: the complex social structure specifically adapted to the difficult environmental and political conditions of desert life would be heretical to orthodox Islam. The variance and high degree of adaptability or flexibility in kinship relations means tribal politics are complex and dynamic.

It is often assumed that sanctuary is cost-free: lack of central authority or poor governance is interpreted to mean terrorists can move in and establish their operations. These Saharan sanctuary areas have existing social structures, however, and local populations with needs seek to impose costs on sanctuary-seekers. These costs, called rent, could be expressed through cash transactions, through payment in providing

services, goods exchange, or even political capital. Marriage and other social contracts could constitute a form of payment through alliance-building.

Actions since the 9/11 attacks indicate the U.S. response to sanctuary is to concentrate operations against sanctuary-seekers. In other words, the focus has been upon finding and destroying enemy forces: Operation NEPTUNE SPEAR – the raid on the Osama bin Laden compound in Pakistan – is the most famous example. The present analysis suggests an alternative approach may be worth considering, an approach that focuses on the costs of creating and maintaining the sanctuary which terrorists require for protection. One solution to terrorist sanctuary may be to increase the costs of sanctuary to the sanctuary-seeker or to change the relationship of sanctuary supply and demand to a point where the costs of sanctuary to the terrorist are unsustainable or unacceptably high. In three words: raise the rent.

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