

Africa, Terrorism and AFRICOM

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The tempo of American involvement in Africa has increased. In January 2007, American AC130 gun-ships blasted suspected Al-Qa'ida hideouts in Somalia. The next month, Washington announced the creation of a dedicated African military command, AFRICOM. This increase in activity raises the question: will Africa become a platform for international terrorist activities and how should the United States, in particular, respond to the potential threat?

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The question has surfaced periodically, especially after the bombings in 1998 of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam. However, it was the Bush administration's September 2002 National Security Strategy declaration, in the wake of overthrowing the Taliban, that 'weak states . . . can pose as great a danger to our national interest as strong states'¹ that most strongly raised the possibility that Africa could be the source of considerable international terrorism, or at least provide sanctuary for those engaged in nefarious acts

against other nations. The question is especially pertinent now, five years after 9/11, given Washington's plans to create AFRICOM, which could have counter-terrorism as one of its central missions.

The focus of this article will be on international terrorism. African countries certainly face a large amount of domestic terrorism; indeed, the death and destruction caused by domestic terrorists such as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda greatly outweighs all international acts of terror in Africa combined. The dynamics of the terrorist threat that individual African countries face should certainly be understood. However, the concerns of the international community – for better and worse – revolve around the possibility of African countries serving, wittingly or not, to promote international terrorism.

Three Specific Concerns

There are three specific concerns with regard to Africa and international terrorism.

First, Africa contains a large number of soft targets and is therefore a relatively easy place to hit the United States, European countries, or Israel. The US embassy bombings brought this fear into the spotlight, as did the Planet Hollywood attacks in Cape Town the same month, and the simultaneous bombing of an Israeli-owned hotel in Mombasa and attempt to shoot down an El Al airplane in 2002. Given that African intelligence and police services are notoriously weak, Africa will continue to offer a large number of



A street in Mogadishu after a government convoy came under attack, 13 March 2007. Photo courtesy of REUTERS/ Shabelle Media

targets for terrorists, although much more care is being taken now than before 1998.

It must also be said that the danger that Westerners in most African countries face from crime and car accidents still outweighs, by a considerable degree, the damage that international terrorists have done to date. Also, while terrorists may want to kill Americans, Europeans, or Israelis for the sake of a body count, terrorist attacks outside of the homeland of these nations simply does not have the same political effect as an attack on New York, London, or Tel Aviv. Many dismiss attacks on Western targets in Africa as part of the price people pay for going to places perceived as dangerous. Thus, the attacks on the US embassies simply did not have much resonance in the United States. President Bill Clinton did little more in response than lob a few missiles into Afghanistan and attack a cough-syrup factory in Khartoum. The 9/11 attacks also essentially raised the bar for terrorists: only even more spectacular attacks on the American (or

European or Israeli) homeland would from now on be seen as being in the same league as what Bin Laden attempted.

Second, African countries may serve as a recruiting ground for terrorists for young, angry marginalized and anti-American youths from Somalia to Senegal, Cape Town to Casablanca. But the installation of radical Islamic regimes is not – Somalia apart – on the agenda, not least since current regimes would not tolerate this. They might, however, turn a blind eye to the *export* of violence. To date, Africans have not appeared in many of the international terrorism incidents, although Somalis and other Africans were involved in the attempted second wave of bombings of the London Underground and Moroccans have been strongly associated with the train bombings in Madrid.

Indeed, what is most notable is, given the vast number of marginalized people who suffer extraordinary deprivation south of the Sahara, how few Africans have been associated with international terrorism incidents. There are many

reasons for this relative lack of participation but the main ones are strongly linked with why so few Africans participate successfully in other aspects of the global economy: poor organization and lack of skills. The poorest Africans are still in the rural areas and these are hard to places for recruiters of any type of organization (including terrorists) to mobilize supporters, given the vast distances and low densities of people. Even the slums of Africa are hard areas to recruit in as they contain ever-shifting populations. In addition, terrorists, like multinational corporations, do not need or want poorly educated people with limited skills as their foot soldiers. Rather, they want people who can blend in to Western societies relatively easily and who are at home with the technology now routinely deployed in the West. Africa is not nearly the well-spring of terrorists that many imagine.

Third, some African countries may unwittingly (or not) serve as a sanctuary and source of succour for international terrorists, the direct fear that motivated

the concerns of the Bush Administration's national security document. Indeed, immediately after the Taliban were overthrown, the greatest worry was that the ungoverned spaces of African countries could become sanctuaries for terrorists. This fear was frequently discussed but was not developed with much conviction. It was, in some ways, typical of the military to always believe that the new war would be like the last, in this case to fight another failed state like Afghanistan. However, even the Afghanistan analogy was imperfect because it was not the case that Bin Laden *et al* had simply set up shop in Afghanistan without knowledge of the government in Kabul; rather, the government of the day was actively co-operating with Bin Laden.

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However, Africa remains a concern to many because its very large 'ungoverned spaces' – vast distances where no government seems to have a writ of authority – seem ideal havens for terrorists. But what sort of ungoverned spaces are more conducive to terrorist activity? There are a spectrum of conditions in Africa where governance is limited, ranging from where there is no governance (Somalia) to areas that have intermittent or ineffectual capabilities and state presence (such as in areas of Ethiopia, DRC and Uganda) to where the rights of citizens are protected from state interference in their lives by liberal constitutions and civic institutions (South Africa). The notion of 'ungoverned spaces' is very different also in terms of spatial needs: training camps have different requirements to simply providing sanctuary.

The likelihood of Africa becoming a haven for terrorist activity depends on a number of factors, notably the presence and extent of governance – and the converse appearance of ungoverned spaces, as in Somalia. Weak multi-ethnic states with underdeveloped police, military and intelligence forces would appear on first blush to be especially prone to the uninvited presence of terrorists. This might be especially true because ungoverned territories seem to imply the unregulated access to weaponry.

Yet entirely ungoverned areas may not be ideal for international terrorists. They require international communications and transport to do their work and populations in which to hide and seek support. Moreover, anarchic environments *a la* Somalia are also dangerous for terrorists as they are for their own citizens. Somalia is not a very good place for terrorists for the same reason it is not a very good place for foreign investors: banks do not work and air links are abysmal. More generally, it is just very hard to get things done. It is South Africa that stands out as an especially welcoming place for terrorists, not because it is poorly governed but because it has excellent banking and transport links to the rest of the world and police and security forces who cannot yet monitor all of these transactions. It is more accurate to suggest that terrorists are potentially attracted to ungoverned spaces that allow international transactions to proceed with little government oversight.

The vulnerability of states to terrorists may have less to do with open spaces than with open societies. A liberal society is far more prone to allow strangers in its midst, especially if these individuals can gain a place at the table with friendly communities. It was, after all, Germany not Africa that was the staging base for the 9/11 terrorists.

This highlights another more controversial determinant: the size, role, presence and political sensibilities of Muslim populations within African countries. Many Muslim populations who do not favour international terrorism may nonetheless give housing, support, and succour to brothers who come to

them claiming harassment from Jordanian, or Pakistani, or Israeli security forces and not ask too many questions about precisely what their co-religionists are fleeing from. Indeed, the areas of Africa where terrorists may find sanctuary most often is not in the inhospitable open areas of failed states but in the large, bustling, anonymous cities of Africa's relatively more developed states, where access to planes, banks, and a supportive community is easy to achieve. South Africa, with its small but cohesive Muslim population, again stands out as a possible haven for terrorists and it is no surprise that various nefarious actors associated with international terrorist incidents have been found in South Africa or to have at least passed through it.²

The US, Africa, and AFRICOM

Traditionally, the US has had only very limited military involvement in Africa. The tragic end of Operation Restore Hope in Somalia – where eighteen US soldiers were killed in the 'Blackhawk Down' episode – further increased the US allergy to operations in Africa. However, 9/11 made it clear to the US military that it must have a much more global perspective. Thus, US military involvement in Africa is still evolving. How it will face the complex yet muted terrorist threat in Africa described above is a central question for US foreign policy.

US military activities in Africa have until now been focused around the 1500 troops of the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) based in Djibouti under the US Central Command (CENTCOM), and the State Department-funded African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance programme, which trains and equips African national militaries to conduct peace support operations and expedite humanitarian relief. The area of responsibility of CJTF-HOA includes Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti and Ethiopia in Africa, and Yemen on the Arabian peninsula. That the AC130 attack in Somalia was launched from neighbouring Ethiopia is an indication of Africa's shared concerns in detecting, disrupting and ultimately defeating regional terrorist groups.

Until now, the rest of African security has largely been run out of the US European Command based at Patch Barracks in Germany. Pacific Command has nominal responsibility for the Indian Ocean islands, though in effect 'they wouldn't know it as they tend to ignore them completely' as one official recently observed. In August 2006, General James Jones, EUCOM's then Commander, said that already 'my staff . . . spends more than half of its time on African issues', an increase from next to nothing three years ago.³ This includes the Pan-Sahel anti-terrorism initiative working with states on both sides of the desert: Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad in the south; Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia in the north. Testifying before the US Congress in 2005, Jones noted that 'the breeding grounds of terrorism and illicit activity on the continent of Africa require our attention'.⁴

But EUCOM's area of responsibility covers more than 13 million square miles and includes ninety-one countries and territories, from Norway to the tip of South Africa. The result? 'Lots of people know about Europe, Asia and more and more about the Middle East. But only a handful have an understanding about the unique challenges in Africa', says one US Department of Defense specialist. 'If Europe's security landscape changed, EUCOM's focus would be right back on that area to Africa's neglect.'⁵ Hence the creation of AFRICOM.

The US's fresh Africa security focus is, of course, not simply for reasons of insecurity. It is also an acknowledgement of Africa's progress of the past decade. Africa has long been seen as a problem to be solved, a continent of failed states, faltering economies and corrupt leadership. This image is a far cry from the Africa of today, a year when it celebrates the half century of the historic independence of Ghana, and where the economic growth rate of the continent has averaged 5 per cent for the past three years. The credit for this turnaround is mostly Africa's. With the support of its allies, democracy and good governance have taken root across the continent, even though challenges remain. The New Partnership for Africa's

Development and the Kimberley Process dealing with so-called 'blood diamonds' are two important examples of the way in which Africans are not only planning for a positive future, but making it a reality. Africa is today thus less a problem to be solved than a voice to be heard. It is also an opportunity for increased capital and trade flows, the substance on which mutual prosperity is built. The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) already grants African economies preferential development access to the US market. Africa's role as a provider or raw materials and oil – currently the US imports two-thirds of its oil needs, and 15 per cent of this comes from Africa, a figure which could increase to 25 per cent by 2015 – highlights this growing importance, exacerbated by competing Chinese state-led interests and involvement.

The US Quadrennial Defense Review⁶ notes the importance of shifting from a reactive to a proactive policy mindset in preventing problems from becoming crises and catastrophes. The creation of AFRICOM is an acceptance, finally, that threats are no longer confined as they were during the Cold War to the major powers and in defined geographic areas. AFRICOM will not immediately increase US military assets on the African continent. It will offer something more important by sharpening focus, creating the mindset to develop greater expertise about Africa. Such knowledge will, with AFRICOM, be a US military requirement and no longer a secondary or tertiary task. AFRICOM's primary task will not be war-fighting but building local security capacity, meaning hopefully less – and not more – need for AC130 strikes.

Six Pointers on Fighting International Terrorism in Africa

AFRICOM presents the United States with fresh new opportunities to become involved in Africa but also with significant challenges, especially in regards to counter-terrorism. Overall, it is probably not the case that Africa is the next great frontier for international

terrorism. Indeed, Africa may actually continue to be more marginal to international terrorists than many had suspected, especially after 9/11. Still, terrorists will not ignore Africa and those concerned with counter-terrorism cannot afford to ignore Africa. So what to do?

Pointer One

Africa's role in international terrorism has to be calibrated correctly. The mere fact that South Africa – rather than one of poorly governed countries of the Sahel or the Horn of Africa – may be an especially likely destination for terrorists is an especially vivid warning sign because AFRICOM certainly will not be active in the territory governed by Pretoria. Africa does have many ungoverned spaces but it is wrong to believe that these areas will be especially attractive to terrorists.

Pointer Two

Westerners must be very aware that many African governments will put far more emphasis on the terrorist threat that they, rightly or wrongly, believe that they face and will use Western assistance to attempt to enhance their own security positions. Western security interests and the domestic concerns of African leaders may go together, but this is not inevitable. Western attention to Africa, even with AFRICOM, will be sporadic but African leaders will always be cognizant of the threats they face.

Pointer Three

In the long-term, political co-operation that leads to better co-ordination of intelligence is probably far more important for the United States' anti-terrorism effort than the creation of AFRICOM. The media-friendly, digital, 'flatter' world applies equally to intelligence matters as it does to commerce. This enables virtual radicalization *via* television and the Internet. Peeling back this complex onion of relationships and networks demands assiduous technical monitoring of international communications, documentation and travel movements, and financial flows. All this requires, in

turn, international co-operation with local intelligence and police agencies. It takes a network to fight a network. This is especially true given that the terrorists are more likely to be found in the bustling cities of Africa where patience and subtle force is necessary rather than the open plains where gunships and helicopters can operate freely.

Pointer Four

Helping Africa's police and military institutions is probably more important than how many US or Western troops operate in Africa. Indeed, Africa's police may be particularly critical to anti-terrorist operations given the ability of terrorists to blend into the cities.

Pointer Five

The issue of Muslim support for terrorists must be confronted directly but with great tact. Those who simply ignore the possibility that Muslim communities may give sanctuary to terrorists because it is a politically inconvenient possibility will miss an important dynamic. At the same time,

the kind of Muslim community support described above – largely apolitical and given in a decentralized and informal manner – does not lend itself to dramatic military or even police action. Rather, African governments – with the limited help that the West can provide – must slowly re-engage with their own Muslim societies so that the brother who shows up with a tale of woe is not immediately absorbed into the community.

Pointer Six

Take care that counter-terrorism operations do not undermine the end-goal, generational enterprise of state-building. This applies equally to ensuring counter-narcotics operations in Afghanistan do not force farmers into a poppy allegiance with the Taliban as it does taking care to build political stability in Somalia. Military operations sponsored by AFRICOM may well be justified in Africa but someone must also be responsible to help pick up the pieces after the gunships and helicopters leave. ■

NOTES

- 1 Found at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf>, p. 2.
- 2 The most notable incident involved Haroon Rashid Aswat, who had spent time in South Africa, and who was later extradited from Zambia for the 7 July 2005 London bombings. More recently, in January 2007 Junaid Dockrat, a dentist from Mayfair in Johannesburg, and his cousin, Farhad Ahmed Dockrat, have been put forward by the United States for inclusion on the UN Security Council's list of terror suspects for alleged links to Al-Qa'ida and the deposed Taliban in Afghanistan. Under UN guidelines, they face the freezing of their assets and bank accounts, and prohibitions on worldwide trade and travel. In response, the SA government asked the UN to delay its decision to name the cousins.
- 3 At <http://www.eucom.mil/english/Transcripts/20060831.asp>.
- 4 At <http://www.fpiif.org/fpifitxt/3157>.
- 5 From discussion at the international Tswalu Dialogue on 'Terrorism and Radicalism in Southern Africa', January 2007.
- 6 Go to <http://www.defenselink.mil/qdr/report/Report20060203.pdf>.



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