

Africa Looks Beyond 'War On Terror'

For long-term solutions rooted in development, human rights

Ernest Harsch



A day after bombings in Mombasa, Kenya, in 2002, against Israeli-linked targets, residents outside one of the city's mosques read a newspaper for details of the attack, which was claimed by Al-Qaida.

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The government of Mali declared in early June that it would mount a “merciless struggle” against terrorist forces operating in the country’s far northern desert. President Amadou Toumani Touré vowed that the killers of a British hostage, murdered just a few days earlier, would not escape unpunished. Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a predominantly Algerian dissident group that had claimed credit for the execution, reacted a few days later by assassinating a colonel in the Malian intelligence service.

Then within less than a week the Malian army launched its first major operations against AQIM bases near the northern border with Algeria, reportedly killing up to two dozen fighters. In subsequent clashes Mali lost some of its own troops.

By directly engaging with AQIM, the Malian authorities demonstrated their willingness to respond to armed challenges with force. Yet Mali’s overall approach to conflict goes well beyond military reactions. Since the 1990s,

Tuareg and other ethnic rebels have been active in Mali’s arid Sahel region. By considering their political and economic grievances, the government has succeeded in persuading many fighters to lay down their weapons.

The establishment of a democratic system in 1992 has facilitated political dialogue, and provides citizens with ways to peacefully air their concerns. Mali has a vibrant civil society and free press as well as a record of respecting human rights. Although the government

has few financial resources, it has devoted much attention to trying to improve conditions for its poorest citizens.

Across Africa, other countries face similar challenges as they try to address immediate security threats while simultaneously pursuing long-range priorities. But because

New Approach

Recent moves by some major powers away from a narrowly militaristic response has now created space for a new approach, noted a group of experts on terrorism convened by the United Nations. A 3–4 June meeting of the experts in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, stressed the importance of Africa’s becoming more engaged in efforts to counter terrorist activities on the continent. But it also highlighted the need to “strengthen the African voice in

the continent confronts so many pressing problems, tackling terrorism has so far not taken a high profile, despite the calls to wage “war on terror” that have been so prominent internationally since the 11 September 2001 attacks in New York and Washington.

the global discussion on terrorism,” said Patrick Hayford, director of the UN’s Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (OSAA), which organized the event.

The participants noted that the adoption in 2006 of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy had marked a shift away from a “hard” military style in countering terrorism, towards a more nuanced approach that combines concerns over security

As Kenyan journalist Mutuma Mathiu summarized the common African view: “For people who have to work reasonably hard to put bread on the table, have to fight AIDS and the escalating cost of living, terrorism appears to be a distant threat. The threat of having nothing for dinner is more immediate.”

with the pursuit of development and the promotion of human rights.

Along those lines, the experts welcomed US President Barack Obama’s moves to shed the rhetoric of the previous administration. That shift, they said, fosters a global climate that is more favorable to the UN’s strategy.



Malian soldiers undergoing counter-terrorism training from US forces: An effective response requires more than military action; it must also include defending human rights, combating poverty and promoting political inclusion.

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On 4 June — by coincidence the final day of the experts’ meeting — Mr. Obama was in Cairo for his first major address to the Islamic world. Although he touched on the events of 11 September, he did not use the charged word

“terrorism” — which has been interpreted by some as anti-Muslim — and repeatedly emphasized the importance of dialogue for building broad alliances to counter extremist groups.

According to Congressman Donald Payne, who heads the House of Representatives’ subcommittee on Africa, broader US policy towards the continent will also shift. “This whole thing can’t be the US’s war on terror,

whatever that was,” he said. Instead, the administration will “concentrate on things that would prevent terror, like higher education.”

John Brennan, the US president’s top adviser on counter-terrorism, has made the same point. In an

address to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington in early August, he noted that when governments fail to ensure the well-being of their citizens, “people become more susceptible to ideologies of violence and death.” Therefore, he added, the administration’s

approach to countering terrorism will include a “political, economic and social campaign to meet the basic needs and legitimate grievances of ordinary people.”

Across Porous Borders

Attacks against innocent civilians by rebel groups and governments alike have long been features of armed conflicts in Africa. But it was the near-simultaneous truck bombings in August 1998 of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which claimed the lives of hundreds of Africans and some foreigners, that brought home the continent’s vulnerability to the activities of international terrorist networks, such as Al-Qaida.

The following year African leaders meeting in Algeria under the Organization of African Unity (OAU) adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism. Although it lacked strong enforcement powers, it nevertheless was the first continental treaty anywhere on countering terrorism. According to Martin Ewi and Kwesi Aning, two African experts on terrorism and conflict resolution, “At a time when the international community was starkly divided on the issue, the convention united African leaders behind a common position for negotiating an international convention.” Since then the OAU’s successor, the African Union, has further developed Africa’s continental approach.

Subsequent events demonstrated that groups using terrorist methods remain active across Africa. They have sometimes been able to move easily across poorly guarded borders, taken advantage of governments’ weak control over their territories and succeeded in recruiting among disaffected populations.

Such threats are spread unevenly across the continent, says Eric Rosand, co-director of the non-governmental Centre on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation in New York, who prepared a background paper for OSAA’s meeting in Addis Ababa. In recent decades some of the most persistent and deadliest attacks have taken place in North Africa, especially in Algeria, which suffered a debilitating civil war in the 1990s and spawned a number of groups, such as AQIM, that now operate beyond that country’s borders as well, even sending fighters as far as Iraq.

East Africa has also seen some dramatic incidents, not only the US embassy bombings but also subsequent attacks in Mombasa, Kenya. In northern Uganda the Lord’s Resistance Army, which claims fundamentalist Christian views, has systematically used

terror methods by murdering, kidnapping and maiming people.

But it is Somalia, which has not had a functioning central government since 1991, that has aroused the greatest international concern over the strength of armed groups perceived as hostile to Western interests. A raid by US commandos into Somalia in September, which reportedly killed a suspected al-Qaida operative working with one of the Somali factions, showed that the new administration in Washington continues to view such forces as a threat.

West Africa has suffered relatively fewer attacks, reports Mr. Rosand, with the exception of Nigeria and the Sahelian countries of Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, where AQIM is active.

Southern Africa has so far seen little terrorist action, apart from some bombings in South Africa, some of them by right-wing domestic groups. But there is evidence that some nationals from Southern Africa have joined groups abroad, and several suspects in attacks elsewhere are known to have passed through the region.

External Pressures

African governments had their own reasons to react to such threats. However, in the wake of the dramatic September 2001 attacks in the US, many governments felt pressure to adopt stringent anti-terrorism legislation and sign military agreements with the US and European countries.

This bred some resentment. According to Mr. Rosand, there is a widespread view in Africa that the initial Western-inspired international campaign against terrorism was “developed without the input of Africans, imposed from the outside.” In Nigeria, early

efforts to introduce counter-terrorism laws met particularly stiff criticism in the predominantly Islamic northern states, where many viewed them as specifically targeted against Muslims.

Many African critics recall that not long ago the colonial authorities and the apartheid regime in South Africa routinely branded all their opponents as terrorists. In light of that experience, the 1999 OAU protocol against terrorism explicitly excluded struggles for liberation against colonialism, occupation and foreign

domination from the definition of terrorist acts.

A number of analysts of terrorism in Africa have argued that external powers have too often disregarded such perceptions, and their actions have been seen as heavy-handed, especially in Somalia, the Sahel and other predominantly Muslim societies. While sometimes striking immediate blows against specific terrorist groups, such interventions, critics argue, have also alienated more moderate elements and even provided ammunition for terrorist recruiters.

Safeguarding Human Rights

In response to both domestic threats and external urging, numerous African governments have adopted laws to strengthen the ability of the police and courts to go after those who use terrorist methods. In many cases the measures were necessary to fill gaps in the legal code. Unfortunately, critics have pointed

out, in some countries leaders have misused the legislation to suppress dissent or discredit political competitors.

In Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda and elsewhere, argues Samuel Makinda, a Kenyan professor of security and international relations

in Australia, new anti-terrorism laws are mostly technical and legal in nature, intended to tighten financial and border controls or protect communications and other infrastructure. But some laws are so broad that they have gone “far beyond constraining terrorism” and could instead “erode human rights and civil liberties.”



Riot police in Zimbabwe: Some governments have used “anti-terrorism” laws to try to suppress dissent.

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In Zimbabwe scores of activists of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) have been arrested in recent years on terrorism charges. Members of the MDC continued to be targeted even after the party agreed to join a unity government in February 2009.

In some countries the press has been threatened. In Swaziland, where the media reported critically on the arrests of some opposition figures on terrorism charges, Attorney General Majahenhaba

Dlamini warned journalists in late 2008: "If you appear to be supporting terrorists in your reporting, woe unto you."

Rotimi Sankore, a Nigerian rights campaigner, has noted the misuse of anti-terrorist laws in Nigeria, Uganda, Zimbabwe and elsewhere. "Now it appears," he says, "that all any corrupt, undemocratic or insecure government needs to do to ensure the support of the West is to sign up to the anti-terror war and introduce 'anti-terrorist' legislation which is sure to be used

to suppress or undermine democratic opposition and human rights."

Boubacar Gaoussou Diarra, director of the African Centre for Studies and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT), argues that it is vital to achieve the right balance. "How can we, as democratic societies that respect human rights, assure our collective protection and fight effectively against this form of intolerable violence?"

Regional Initiatives

The ACSRT, based in Algeria's capital, Algiers, is just one initiative of African leaders to ensure that responses to terrorism conform more closely to the continent's broader aspirations for political and economic development. Opened in 2004 as an institution of the African Union (AU), and now with 42 national and seven regional focal points, the centre shares information, provides counter-terrorism training to the AU's member states and carries out detailed research to help Africans better understand the causes and features of terrorism in Africa.

Building on the OAU's earlier convention, the African Union in 2002 adopted a Plan of Action on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism in Africa. The plan went beyond the previous emphasis on law enforcement to also address the under-lying causes of terrorist violence. It urged governments to promote policies to reduce poverty, deprivation and marginalization, which can foster discontent and be used by terrorist groups to justify violence. This aspect was later recognized in the

UN's own Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

Combating terrorism in Africa also requires greater coordination, both among African countries and between Africa and its international partners, argues the AU plan. In the Sahel region, neighboring countries are starting to better coordinate activities against AQIM. The Malian army's offensive against the group, for example, benefited from intelligence provided by the Algerian authorities.

"How can we, as democratic societies that respect human rights, assure our collective protection and fight effectively against this form of intolerable violence?" — Boubacar Gaoussou Diarra, director, African Centre for Studies and Research on Terrorism

While the AU plan cites the key roles of the AU Commission and the Peace and Security Council in coordinating efforts across the continent, it also looks to the various regional economic groupings to take a lead.

Among these, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has been especially energetic. IGAD, whose active members include Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda, was originally established to deal with drought and desertification, but has become increasingly active in seeking to resolve the region's various armed conflicts.

With funding from European and other donors, the group established an IGAD Capacity Building Program Against Terrorism (ICPAT) in 2006. Overseen by the region's governments and with administrative support from South Africa's non-governmental Institute of Security Studies (ISS), the program focuses on enhancing judicial measures and border controls, providing training and strengthening coordination on counter-terrorism among different agencies.

The program suffers from some shortcomings, however, notes Richard Barno, a Kenyan jurist who has worked with the ICPAT. Not only is it seriously short of

funding — a problem common to such coordination initiatives across Africa — but political mistrust among governments has led to a “high level of skepticism” about its efforts, Mr. Barno argues. These

became so serious that Eritrea, which once belonged to IGAD, suspended its membership in 2007, and in May 2009 IGAD condemned Eritrea’s support for certain factions in Somalia.

Despite such difficulties, adds Mr. Rosand, the region’s governments “seem to genuinely appreciate [the ICPAT’s] technically focused, results-oriented work and are deeply engaged in the program.”

Involving The Public

Better coordination among African governments, intelligence services and police and military personnel — and between Africa and the UN — are vitally important, noted the experts at the OSAA meeting in Addis Ababa, and such efforts generally require more financing than they currently receive. But it is equally essential, they added, for governments and international agencies to better engage African civil society and community groups.

Too often, argues Anneli Botha, a senior researcher on terrorism at South Africa’s ISS, African leaders tend to regard counter-terrorism activities as an exclusive

responsibility of governments, while security forces frequently treat information about them as “top secret.” As a result, she argues, governments needlessly exclude “a valuable source of information: the broad public,” and make it harder to establish public trust in official efforts.

The UN’s global strategy, which supports greater civil society involvement, can be used by African groups to open up counter-terrorism initiatives in Africa, argued participants at a civil society workshop in Cape Town, South Africa, in late June. Organized by the ISS and the Centre on Global

Counterterrorism Cooperation, the workshop reinforced many of the recommendations of the OSAA meeting earlier that month.

African civil society and community groups, argued the Cape Town workshop, can help build support for the efforts of the UN and AU, highlight the importance of protecting human rights and reach out to vulnerable and marginalized communities. “By sharing information with and seeking to engage with civil society,” noted the workshop organizers, “governments are enhancing their security.”

A Global Framework Against Terrorism

For decades the United Nations has taken concrete steps to counter the threat of terrorism. These included the negotiation of more than a dozen international treaties and conventions against specific activities such as hijacking, hostage taking, bombing and the financing of terrorism. The Security Council has repeatedly condemned terrorist attacks and set up several subsidiary bodies, including the Counter-Terrorism Committee and its Executive Directorate. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime and various other UN offices and agencies also

take up aspects of this effort. The Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, established in 2005 to coordinate activities, now consists of 25 UN entities, as well as Interpol, the international police organization.

In September 2006 the General Assembly adopted the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. This marked a major shift in the global response: support for UN counter-terrorism efforts had broadened out from the few countries represented on the Security

Council and now encompassed the entire membership. At the same time the General Assembly expanded the framework to include not only tougher law enforcement and other security measures, but also steps to address the underlying social, economic and political conditions that have favored the spread of terrorism. While recognizing the primary responsibility of member states to protect their citizens, the strategy also highlights the role of the UN system, regional bodies (such as the African Union) and civil society groups.

The Strategy Rests On Four “Pillars”:

- *Addressing the conditions conducive to terrorism, including by resolving and preventing conflicts, promoting dialogue among religions and cultural groups, achieving the Millennium Development Goals, combating social exclusion and supporting good governance*
- *Preventing and combating terrorism*
- *Building the capacity of states to prevent and combat terrorism and strengthening the role of the UN system to do so*
- *Ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law as the fundamental basis of the fight against terrorism.*

“Terrorism hurts all nations — large and small, rich and poor,” UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told member states in 2007. “It takes its toll on human beings of every age and income, culture and religion. It strikes against everything the United Nations stands for. The fight against terrorism is our common mission.”

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