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Domestic or International Terrorism? A Dysfunctional Dialogue

Most American dialogue about terrorism with Africans, particularly with countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, is dysfunctional. Americans focus on acts of international terrorism while Africans are more concerned about cases of domestic terrorism that rarely reach the pages of major American newspapers. The problem begins with lack of an agreed upon definition of terrorism. Forty-six of the fifty-three members of the African Union (AU) have signed the organization's 1999 Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism and thirty-six states have ratified the document. The Convention entered into force in 2002. It contains a long, complex, and somewhat confusing definition of a terrorist act:

“Any act which is a violation of the criminal laws of a State Party and which may endanger the life, physical integrity or freedom of, or cause serious injury or death to, any person, any number or group of persons or causes or may cause damage to public or private property, natural resources, environmental or cultural heritage and is calculated or intended to:

- (i) intimidate, put in fear, force, coerce or induce any government, body, institution, the general public or any segment thereof, to do or abstain from doing any act, or to adopt or abandon a particular standpoint, or to act according to certain principles; or
- (ii) disrupt any public service, the delivery of any essential service to the public or to create a public emergency; or
- (iii) create general insurrection in a State.”

By contrast, the United States relies on a definition contained in Title 22 of the U.S. Code which states that “international terrorism” means terrorism involving citizens or the territory of more than one country. The term “terrorism” is premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by sub national groups or clandestine agents. The term “terrorist group” means any group practicing, or which has specific subgroups which practice, international terrorism. The State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism* for 2004 notes that terrorist acts are part of a larger phenomenon of politically inspired violence, and at times the line between the two is difficult to distinguish. The report adds that it includes some discretionary information in an effort to relate terrorist events to the larger political context in which they occur. The fact remains that the U.S. has a different understanding of the definition of terrorism than do member nations of the African Union.

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This disconnect becomes evident in *Patterns of Global Terrorism*. The chronology of significant international terrorist incidents contained in the appendix for the 2003 edition explained that a significant international incident must result in loss of life or serious injury to persons, major property damage (more than \$10,000), and/or is an act or attempt that could reasonably be expected to create these conditions. (Disagreement over which terrorist incidents to include resulted in no appendix in the 2004 edition of *Patterns of Global Terrorism*.) It then identified 175 incidents worldwide in 2003. Only fifteen of them occurred in Africa. Algeria accounted for eight, Somalia/Somaliland for four, and Morocco, Kenya and Eritrea one each. All but one of the incidents in Africa involved harm or threatened harm to foreigners (mainly Westerners). The exception occurred in Eritrea, where there was an attack on Eritrean civilians working for a U.S. non-governmental organization.

In 2003 there were actually hundreds of terrorist acts against civilians in the eastern Congo, northern Uganda, Liberia, Somalia, Sudan, Burundi, etc. Most took place as a result of civil conflict. The fifteen international incidents in Africa identified in *Patterns of Global Terrorism* do not even come close to cataloging all the cases of terrorism on the continent in 2003. In recent years, far more African civilians have been killed by extremists and terrorists in internal conflicts than by persons motivated by international causes. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, Eritrean Islamic Jihad (EIJ), al-Ittihad al-Islami in Somalia, Interahamwe in the eastern Congo and Rwanda, and the Janjaweed in Sudan are just a few groups that engage or engaged in domestic terrorism. The Institute of Security Studies in South Africa calculated that 64 percent of the targets of African domestic terrorism were civilians between 2000 and 2003.

The National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT) maintains a separate catalog of terrorist incidents worldwide based mainly on press reports. It makes no distinction between domestic and international terrorist incidents. Although the MIPT methodology is also flawed and underreports cases, it routinely lists more incidents than *Patterns of Global Terrorism*. In 2003, for example, MIPT cited four terrorist attacks in Ethiopia versus none in *Patterns* and six in Morocco versus one in *Patterns*. But both accounts miss significant numbers of cases in Africa where civilians die or are injured as a result of attacks that most observers would consider terrorism.

The political goals of domestic and international terrorist groups tend to differ. As well as an act of destruction, a terrorist atrocity is also an advertisement of the power and resolve of the perpetrators and weakness of the target. For international terrorists, their stage is world public opinion, and their targets are often the most powerful countries in the world. Domestic terrorism tends to be acted out on a smaller stage with more parochial motives. But it can be no less deadly. Of course, international terrorists can make alliance with domestic groups, and localized ideological campaigns can grow or acquire new targets, for example if the U.S. is seen to be the patron of a national government targeted by a local group. For most Africans, the issue is domestic terrorism. The U.S. is motivated by international terrorism, especially when it involves Americans. If the U.S. continues a dialogue with Africans that is aimed primarily at reducing attacks on foreigners, especially Westerners, it will encounter African leaders who pay lip service to American concerns and who are happy to take U.S. financial assistance, but the two parties will have a different agenda. At the same time, this is not an argument for encouraging

the U.S. to support autocratic governments in Africa that are confronting local opposition groups that use terrorist tactics. It is rather a warning that the U.S. needs to be very clear what it is dealing with on the other side of the table when it discusses the topic with African governments and supports counterterrorism programs in Africa.

Factors that Impede or Enhance Extremism and Terrorism

There are many reasons why extremism and terrorism develop in Africa. These include poor governance, corruption, radical ideology and religious beliefs, opposition to Western policies, a desire to impose a new political order, etc. The most important characteristics in Africa are not necessarily identical to those found in the Middle East, South Asia, or Western Europe. Some experts on terrorism insist there is no link between poverty, the need for economic development in fragile states, and terrorism. They note that international terrorists tend to come from relatively well educated and even middle class urban backgrounds; poverty was not a factor in their upbringing. While this is often true, it is not a convincing rebuttal when identifying the factors that contribute to terrorism in Africa. First, most extremist and terrorist acts in Africa are domestic and perpetrated by those who are stuck in grinding poverty, are politically marginalized, and/or are suffering significant social and economic inequality. Second, even international terrorists seek hospitable environments in which to operate. A failed state like Somalia, the politically and economically marginalized Swahili coast of Kenya and Tanzania, Islamic radicalism in Northern Nigeria and Cape Town in South Africa, and the poverty of an urban center like Addis Ababa or Casablanca offer hospitable environments for terrorists to exploit.

The May 9, 2005, *U.S. News & World Report* ran a lengthy piece on terrorism in Morocco. Moroccan officials conceded that extremists inhabit the slums, where some 10 percent of the country's thirty-two million people live. The article added that Morocco's shantytowns seem to be producing terrorists who seek to wreak havoc across Europe. It quoted a senior U.S. official as comparing Moroccan shantytowns to "dry timber" where "an uneducated, unemployed young male is a great recruiting ground for anyone with a radical message." Moroccan officials claimed that new housing and other improvements are undercutting the appeal of extremism. African leaders, in an effort to attract more foreign assistance, tend to draw a closer link between poverty and terrorism than the situation may merit. But it is a huge mistake to dismiss the connection. Any strategy designed to counter extremism and terrorism in Africa must be conducted in partnership with African governments. If those governments perceive that reducing poverty is an intrinsic part of the solution, then it must be considered seriously in the dialogue. If the U.S. assists Africans in countering what they see as a root cause of (mostly domestic) terrorism and extremism, it will likely receive greater African cooperation in countering international terrorism and extremism.

U.S. policy on the role of poverty and inequality as reasons for extremism and terrorism has been evolving in the right direction. The cover letter signed by President Bush for the September 2002 *National Security Strategy* states: "Poverty does not make poor people into terrorists and murders. Yet poverty, weak institutions, and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders." The February 2003 *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* acknowledged that while many terrorist

organizations have little in common with the poor and destitute, they exploit these conditions to their advantage. It recognized that weak and failed states are a source of international instability and that they may become a sanctuary for terrorism. The policy asserts that the U.S. will take steps designed to identify and diminish conditions contributing to state weakness and failure. This includes U.S. help to resolve regional disputes, foster economic, social, and political development, market-based economies, good governance, and the rule of law. President Bush was even more explicit when he said at the United Nations in New York on September 14, 2005: “We must help raise up the failing states and stagnant societies that provide fertile ground for the terrorists. We must defend and extend a vision of human dignity, and opportunity, and prosperity—a vision far stronger than the dark appeal of resentment and murder. To spread a vision of hope, the United States is determined to help nations that are struggling with poverty.” Now, of course, the U.S. must implement that promise if it is serious about combating extremism and terrorism in Africa.

Religion, Extremism, and Terrorism

In recent decades radical Islamists have dominated the discussion of terrorism and extremism in Africa. It is important to understand, however, that numerous groups around the world rely heavily on terrorist tactics and engage in extremism but are not Islamic. This has particularly been the case with groups in Africa that engaged or continue to engage in domestic terrorism. Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), the LRA in northern Uganda, UNITA in Angola, RENAMO in Mozambique, Interahamwe in Rwanda and eastern Congo are not Islamic groups but are well known for using terrorism as a weapon. Groups that have used terrorism like the Allied Democratic Front in Uganda and RUF in Sierra Leone draw on both Muslims and non-Muslims.

While non-Muslim groups conduct their share of extremism and terrorism in Africa, there is no shortage of Muslim groups that use terrorism. Organizations like al-Ittihad in Somalia, Eritrean Islamic Jihad, Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in Ethiopia, al-Gama’a al-Islamiya in Egypt, and the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in Algeria are examples. Some of these groups have “Muslim” identity mainly because they draw recruits from Islamic communities. Insofar as they are fighting secular governments, they tend to take on “Islamic” coloring and to be hospitable to foreign Islamists who may offer solidarity, funds, weapons, and training. Others were born out of collaboration between domestic and international Islamists; many of them have ties to international terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda.

The Islamic organizations that use terrorist tactics or engage in extremism can more easily take root in countries that are predominantly Muslim or have a significant Muslim minority. According to the CIA 2004 *World Factbook*, Africa’s population was about 871 million. Using the *Factbook*’s percent of Muslim population for each African country, the total Muslim population in Africa was about 401 million or 46 percent of the continent’s population. www.Islamicpop.com uses somewhat higher Islamic percentages for some African countries. Calculations based on this web site result in a Muslim percentage for all of Africa of 49 percent. Whatever source you use, the continent is almost half Muslim. In addition to the five countries of North Africa, those that are at least 50 percent Muslim according to the *World Factbook* are:

Burkina Faso, Chad, Comoro Islands, Djibouti, Eritrea, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Sudan. Tanzania and Cote d'Ivoire are not far behind. All North African countries are members of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). In addition, five sub-Saharan countries (Somalia, Sudan, Comoro Islands, Mauritania, and Djibouti) are members of the Arab League and twenty-two are members of the OIC. Countries such as Mozambique and Uganda, which have relatively small Muslim minorities, are members of the OIC, presumably because they wish to attract money from wealthy Islamic countries.

Most Muslims in Africa follow forms of Sufism that are highly tolerant, have adopted many elements of traditional African beliefs, and have been resistant to radical Islam. More recently, however, Islamic militants have spread Sunni orthodoxies in Africa. Extremist political beliefs propagated by the Muslim Brothers in Egypt made inroads in the Horn of Africa. The fundamentalist al-Tabliq movement with links to Pakistan and India now appears in the Sahel and East and West Africa. Salafi and Wahhabi proselytizing from Saudi Arabia and some of the Gulf States is having an impact on both sides of Africa. In several cases, funding provided by Saudi charities such as al-Haramain to its branches in Africa has been linked directly to terrorist activity. As a result, Saudi Arabia last year reorganized its system of charities and shut down al-Haramain. It is not at all clear, however, that these financial flows from the Gulf in support of terrorist activities in East Africa and the Horn have ended.

The intolerant Salafis and Wahhabis claim to be taking Islam back to its origins and purifying it of characteristics that have grown up over time, especially among Sufis. The result, however, has been occasional conflict between followers of Sufi Islam and the Wahhabis who have Saudi backing and are working to replace Sufi traditions. At the same time, the Wahhabis build mosques, Islamic schools, orphanages, and social centers, all of which are much in demand. Poor Islamic communities in Africa are reluctant to turn down this largesse, especially when neither the government nor other donors fill the void. This outside influence has created a diversity of Islam in Africa that is poorly understood by most American officials and argues for carefully reasoned and targeted U.S. policy responses.

Transnational Threats

Civil wars provide the most hospitable environment for extremists. They often allow either insurgents or governments to have recourse to criminalized economic networks for acquiring arms, funds and military specialists, and arenas where domestic and national agendas for secret military training and illicit operations converge. The RUF in Sierra Leone and UNITA in Angola were cases in point. The relationship in Africa between organized crime and terrorist organizations has not been well documented. Studies have linked al-Qaeda with the trade in gold and diamonds from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania and South Africa. An organization believed to front for al-Qaeda made huge profits from sales of tanzanite and reportedly used them to finance terrorist acts. Douglas Farah has documented Hezbollah and al-Qaeda involvement in the West African diamond trade. He pointed out that al-Qaeda purchased between \$30 million and \$50 million worth of diamonds from former Liberian President Charles Taylor during the eight months prior to 9/11. The purpose was not to make a profit, but rather to buy the stones as a way of transferring value from other assets. Hezbollah uses West Africa to

raise funds, recruit new members and launder money by activating the large Shi'a and Lebanese communities in Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Benin. Hezbollah probably initiated the practice of using diamonds mined in Sierra Leone to finance terrorist activities. The U.S. effectively shut down the money transfer company known as al-Barakaat, which operated throughout Somalia. Although it never released the evidence, the U.S. said al-Barakaat had been used to funnel potentially millions of dollars annually to al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

The link between drug trafficking and terrorism in Africa is even less well documented, at least in the public domain and assuming there is a significant connection. Several possibilities exist. Heroin from South Asia has moved across Africa from east to west before it is transshipped, often by Nigerian mules, to Europe and North America. In the mid-1990s, Nigeria supplied one-third of the heroin seized in the U.S. and more than half the cocaine imported by South Africa. This transit of drugs would seem to open up attractive possibilities for linkages to international terrorism. On a regional level, the *khat* trade is a highly lucrative business in East Africa, the Horn, and Yemen. The amphetamine-like stimulant grows in the highlands of Kenya and Ethiopia. It is widely used by Somalis and Yemenis and spreading to other users. Although legal in the region, it is illegal in the U.S. *Khat* has been a major factor in financing conflict in Somalia and may well support terrorist and extremist activity in East Africa and the Horn. There is also the possibility that *cannabis* grown in Southern Africa has funded international terrorism. Interestingly, one organization—People against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD)—initially adopted terrorist tactics in order to combat crime and drugs in the Western Cape of South Africa. PAGAD subsequently turned its terrorist attacks against government security forces and western businesses until it collapsed in 2002.

Ungoverned Territories and Porous Borders

Africa is replete with porous and poorly defined borders, ungoverned territories, refugee movements, internally displaced persons, and cross border conflict. The negative repercussions of this situation manifest themselves more commonly in traditional conflict driven by ethnic differences, competition for scarce resources, and periodic attempts to seize political power through the use of force. The Horn of Africa over the last fifty years has been especially vulnerable. It is virtually impossible, for example, to stop the movement of small arms across the borders of most African countries. So far, the exploitation of these areas for developing terrorist operations and training bases has been limited. The most worrisome case in recent years has been Somalia where borders with Ethiopia and Kenya are long, porous, and ungoverned. The Somali coast is also poorly patrolled as acts of piracy continue to occur and arms flow regularly into the country by dhows from the Gulf and from along the East African coast. Somalia has been a failed state since the fall of the Siad Barre government in 1991; the new Transitional Federal Government has not yet asserted authority throughout the country. Somalia-based al-Ittihad in the mid-1990s conducted a number of terrorist attacks against targets in neighboring Ethiopia. An al-Qaeda cell in Mogadishu is believed to have supported the attacks on the American embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 1998 and Israeli interests near Mombasa, Kenya, in 2002. At one time, al-Ittihad had small training facilities in Somalia, although this no longer seems to be the case. Al-Ittihad has gone underground or even subdivided into several small extremist groups. The Ogaden National

Liberation Front, which has conducted terrorist attacks inside Ethiopia, also receives support from inside Somalia.

Sudan has long, porous borders with both Ethiopia and Eritrea. At different periods in recent decades all three countries have supported dissident movements in one or both neighboring countries. Some of these dissident movements, particularly Eritrean Islamic Jihad that operated out of Sudan, used terrorism as a weapon. The Eastern Congo combines ungoverned territory with porous borders; the result is dissident groups that engage in domestic terrorist acts. The Sahel countries, especially Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad, all have porous and ungoverned borders with neighboring Algeria and Libya and among themselves. Heightened activity by Salafist groups and occasional acts of terrorism have recently been a feature in all four of these Sahel countries. Commonly referred to by the U.S. military as the new front in the war on terrorism, the International Crisis Group concedes that the situation in the Sahel countries justifies caution and greater Western involvement. It adds, however, that the Sahel is not a hotbed of terrorist activity. Northern Nigeria, the Swahili coast in East Africa, and the Comoro Islands are additional areas with weak governance and/or porous borders where extremism and terrorism have become a serious concern. Although the problem is real and growing in these regions of Africa and may well spread to other parts of the continent, it is important to understand the difference between domestic and international terrorism and to separate terrorist acts aimed at overthrowing a government from those that have a wider international agenda. Both kinds of terrorism need to be countered, but they require a different dialogue and may require a different policy response.

Developing African Capabilities for Countering Terrorism and Extremism

The African countries have been more effective at talking a good counterterrorism line than they have been at putting an effective program in place. There are, however, some legitimate explanations for this situation. Dealing with terrorism and extremism is expensive and time consuming. Most African countries are poor and must concentrate on a host of more pressing issues such as inadequate health care, education, and infrastructure. In addition, there are structural problems such as porous borders, ethnic and religious fault lines, and proximity to the Gulf that time and money may never resolve. As a result, countering terrorism and extremism has not been a high priority for most African countries. There are exceptions like Algeria which has experienced the full effect of terrorism. Probably for this reason, Algeria led the effort in the then Organization of African Unity to obtain agreement on a continent wide convention for countering terrorism. But the fact remains that most African countries have neither the financial resources, human capacity, and, in some cases, even the will to make this a priority. When you add poor governance, very high levels of corruption, and marginalized communities in some African countries, it will take an extraordinary international training and assistance effort to have any real positive impact on their situation.

No country outside Africa has done more than the U.S. to combat terrorism on the continent. Since 9/11 there have been four multi-country programs in Africa. The U.S. established the Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) in Djibouti in 2002. It has responsibility for monitoring Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Kenya, and Yemen and plans to include Tanzania and Uganda. With some 1,400 military and civilian

personnel, its mission has evolved over time and now focuses on gathering intelligence, training friendly militaries, and creating goodwill by carrying out civic action projects. The U.S. launched in 2003 a \$100 million East Africa Counterterrorism Initiative (EACTI) to provide counterterrorism equipment, training, and assistance to Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya. It began the same year an \$8.4 million Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI) in Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad. Under the PSI the U.S. military provided counterterrorism training for the security forces of these countries during 2003-04. As a follow on to this program, the U.S. began a long-term Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI) in 2005 that includes the four Sahel countries and adds Algeria, Senegal, Nigeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and eventually perhaps Libya. Funding over the next seven years may reach \$500 million. The purpose is to improve the military and political capability of these governments to meet the terrorist threat. The TSCTI looks beyond the provision of training and equipment for CT units and will consider development assistance, expanded public diplomacy, and support for improved governance and human rights.

It is too early to assess the success of these multi-country programs and even some older bilateral efforts to counter terrorism in Africa. The commander of CJTF-HOA acknowledged in mid-2004 that the task force may not have foiled any specific terrorist strikes, but he believed its work with local forces had prevented attacks. Persons who work this issue acknowledge that terrorism and extremism are long-term threats that require an equivalent long-term response. It is also increasingly clear, as the TSCTI seems to suggest, that it is important to go beyond CT training, the provision of equipment and software for tracking persons, uncovering money laundering, and establishing watch lists. It is critical to improve governance, work with other donors and host governments on reducing political and economic inequality, and attack corruption. It does little good, for example, to spend huge sums on development of special anti-terrorism police units if the entire police force is inherently corrupt. It is necessary first to get corruption under control.

It is equally essential that the U.S. develop much better expertise on the causes of extremism and terrorism in Africa and improved understanding of the role and importance of Islam on the continent. Finally, at least small numbers of field personnel must improve their local language capability, e.g. Arabic, Swahili, Hausa, and Somali, so that they can speak directly with persons in communities that might be sympathetic to extremist views. Personnel with these kinds of skills then need to be assigned to U.S. embassies and consulates in countries of most concern, remain at post for more than two years so that they have an opportunity to learn more effectively about the country, and be encouraged to travel widely and frequently outside the confines of the American embassy or consulate. If the U.S. is not prepared to make this kind of wider commitment, all the specialized CT initiatives and multi-million dollar programs will probably have little impact in Africa.