African Fight Against Terrorism, Where is the Western Support?

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Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

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The redeployment of U.S. troops back into Somalia is a welcome decision. However, the continent of Africa at large is struggling to cope with growing terrorist threats. Home to a growing number of Jihadist organizations, Africa is a new key front in the fight against terrorism. Eliminating these threats demands deepened U.S. involvement and its allies to partner with local forces and commit to a sustained U.S. military presence on the ground.

According to Stephen Townsend, the top U.S. military commander in Africa, "deadly terrorism has metastasized to Africa." Terrorists in Africa "remain grave and growing threats that aspire to kill Americans both there and in our homeland," he added. Therefore, if the United States wants to reduce the threats of terrorism both at home and abroad, it needs to partner with African nations and reaffirm its shared determination to fight terrorist organizations, wherever they are found. Otherwise, America's efforts to combat terrorism and prevent violent extremism from taking hold anywhere in the world will be at stake.

The fall of the Islamic State (ISIS) "caliphate" has forced many of its fighters to flee to Africa, hastening Africa's emergence as a global epicenter for terrorist organizations. Jihadist activities have rapidly expanded across the continent, including throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. Fighters and various Islamic State *Wilayat* ("provinces") have emerged from west to east, from south to north, from Sahara to Sahel and even from the center of the continent.

In West Africa, both Boko Haram and the so-called Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA), which split from the former, have killed and abducted hundreds, looted on a massive scale and frequently conducted horrific attacks in Nigeria.

In the east, Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Shabaab and the ISIS-linked Abnaa ul-Calipha terrorize the region, killing hundreds, both locals and Americans. As of mid-2022, Al-Shabaab has escalated attacks across Somalia, killing 30 Burundian soldiers serving as African Union peacekeepers.

Many security experts argue the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Somalia allowed Al-Shabaab to come out from hiding, mobilize and carry out this offensive.

In the south, the ISIS-aligned Ahlu Sunna wal-Jama, otherwise locally known as Al-Shabaab (not related to the Somalia-based organization), briefly captured two oil-rich towns in northern Mozambique in 2021. Al-Shabaab has been terrorizing local communities even longer, attacking villages along the Mozambique–Tanzania border since 2017.

In the north, one of the most prominent groups operating in the region is Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), an Al-Qaeda affiliate founded in Algeria in 1998. Formerly known as "*the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat*" (GSPC), many of AQIM's leaders are Algerian Arab Jihadists. After fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, they have returned determined, to implement Al-Qaeda's vision at home. To further increase their capabilities, the group courts local secessionists, which leads to convenient alliances with those holding different ideologies.

While AQIM had previously allied with local militias and tribal groups in Mali, it now cooperates with the Polisario Front, exemplifying the convenient link between separatist movements and terror groups. The Polisario Front is the Sahrawi nationalist liberation movement disputing Morocco's control over the Western Sahara. In 2011, evidence emerged that some of its members had been cooperating with AQIM in trafficking "drugs, arms, and humanitarian commodities". This separatist group-terror nexus is aided by proximity, as Polisario's headquarters are based in the Sahrawi refugee camps in the southwestern Algerian city of Tindouf, near AQIM's zones of operation.

While Polisario defines itself as primarily nationalist and secular, it frequently works alongside Islamist groups like AQIM or the Iran-backed Hezbollah, the Shiite extremist group that reportedly recently established *"training camps"* in Tindouf.

A noteworthy example of the separatist-terrorist nexus is Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, the former leader of the ISIS-affiliated Islamic State in the Greater Sahara who was killed by French forces in August 2021. Initially, al-Sahrawi had joined Polisario but disappointed with its lack of progress, then switched to the jihadist Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO).

In Central Africa, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), which was founded in Uganda in 1995 by a coalition of rebels to fight against the Yoweri Museveni regime, recently joined the Central Africa Province of the Islamic State. The ADF has intensified attacks in the DRC-Uganda border areas. In late 2020, the group attacked a jail in Beni in the eastern DRC, freeing more than 1,300 fighters. According to Mozambican authorities, the ADF have recruited fighters from Mozambique, Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda.

Across Africa, terrorist groups aim to accomplish three things: Establishing havens, recruiting and radicalizing locals and acquiring uncontrolled territory in which to maneuver, train, plan, collect taxes and govern. Vincent Foucher, an Islamist extremism expert, argues that for such organizations sub-Saharan Africa uniquely allows terrorist groups to achieve large returns with "minimal investment", since organizations like ISIS can hold thousands of square kilometers of territory in which to create bases.

Africa is no stranger to housing such terrorist organizations. There are areas throughout the continent where terrorists can easily hide among the locals, exploiting the weakness of the continent's security systems and military forces. Generally, African forces lack the ability to use crucial "air power, precision weapons and armored vehicles" to fight ISIS. An example can be seen in Mozambique's defense forces who are "*widely regarded as corrupt, poorly trained and ill-equipped*". These forces failed to contain the ISIS-affiliated Al-Shabaab, which operates in the northern part of the country.

Africa's current state unfortunately proves ideal for recruitment and radicalization. Both Al-Qaeda and ISIS and their affiliates have recently been recruiting Africans. In Somalia for example, Al-Shabaab (an al-Qaeda affiliate) "*now has as many as 12,000 fighters and can raise up to $10 million in revenue per month,*" according to a February 2022 estimate.

The ADF in DRC is also recruiting fighters from Uganda, <u>Kenya and Tanzania</u>. ISWA <u>has also been recruiting Africans</u>, with footage allegedly showing the group training boys and having them execute captured enemies.

Furthermore, both ISIS and Al-Qaeda affiliates control large swathes of territory across the continent. ISWA, for example, operates in the <u>Liptako-Gourma region of the Sahel</u>, including parts of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and north-eastern Nigeria. Meanwhile, Al-Shabaab controls large swaths of southern Somalia. According to U.S. officials, ISIS exploits "local grievances" in their surroundings and "*<u>start[s] recruiting based on that</u>*", increasing the caliphate's manpower.

In summary, Africa has significant geopolitical importance for jihadist organizations. The current trend shows that terrorist organizations in the continent have grown stronger, expanding their presence, forging alliances with separatist movements, and intensifying their attacks on U.S. allies and interests. Without persistent international pressure, terrorist organizations fleeing the Middle East (and other places) will reemerge from hiding, reorganize their fighters and recruit additional forces to start conducting attacks across the continent, injuring key U.S. allies and damaging core U.S interests. To tackle these security challenges, the continent needs both U.S. and international support. Otherwise, the hard-fought efforts led by the U.S. to prevent and defeat global terrorism will be in jeopardy.