

## Africa's New Strategic Significance

As international attention in the war on terrorism continues to focus primarily on the Middle East, it is easy to forget that Al Qaeda's most extreme terrorist attacks prior to September 11 were the August 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi. These attacks cost the lives of 224 people (including 12 Americans) and injured 4,574 more. Since that time, Africa has been again struck, on May 16, 2003, when 14 suicide bombers killed 44 people and injured more than 100 in a coordinated attack on five targets in Casablanca. In May 2004, South Africa's police commissioner announced that authorities had arrested several Al Qaeda suspects "who had evil intentions against this country"<sup>1</sup> just five days before the country's mid-April democratic election, its second ever. While in the spotlight of international attention, Al Qaeda's African activities have nevertheless paled in comparison to the continent's homegrown, domestic sources of insecurity and violence.

Terrorism is also a tactic that guerrilla armies and warlords in Africa have adopted for decades during wars predating and unconnected to the larger global terrorist threat. If terrorism is defined as violent acts against a civilian population by nonstate actors, then it is employed by many African groups, including paramilitaries in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where probably more than three million citizens have lost their lives in the last half-decade; the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone; all the warring parties in Liberia; militias in the Republic of the Congo; warlords in Somalia; and many other participants of Africa's numerous civil wars. So-called armies, which often resemble loose confederations of armed gangs, regularly

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use terrorist tactics, including abduction of children, amputation, rape, and indiscriminate killing, to coerce local populations into supporting their causes or to garner resources to continue fighting. Domestic terrorists in Africa's civil wars have killed a far greater number of Africans than have terrorists motivated by international causes. Ongoing African conflicts afflict approximately 20 percent of the continent's population, with most of its victims being innocent civilians.<sup>2</sup>

The post-September 11 U.S.-led war on terrorism targets terrorist acts that, although horrific, have claimed relatively few lives by the standards of violence in Africa. The real terrorist threat on this continent remains internal. Importantly, however, September 11 highlighted the conditions of governance and economic growth necessary not only for African stability, but also prosperity. While Al Qaeda was plotting the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, African leaders were devising a plan for African economic recovery, deemed the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), formally adopted by the then Organization of African Unity (OAU) in October 2001. NEPAD offers a partnership to end African sources of insecurity, proposing a new global aid and development regime for Africa in response to what is essentially an African-imposed structural adjustment program. This coincidence in timing also marks shared Western and African interest to strengthen local initiatives to deal both with continental and global terrorism through building state capacities.

## **Raising Africa's Profile**

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Had there never been a September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush arguably never would have made a visit to Senegal, South Africa, Botswana, Uganda, and Nigeria in July 2003—the first visit by a sitting Republican president to Africa. At the very least, the September 11 attacks added urgency to his visit. Prior to his departure, the president stated that “many African governments have the will to fight the war on terror ... we will give them the tools and the resources to win [this] war.”<sup>3</sup>

According to the September 2002 U.S. *National Security Strategy*, the attacks taught the United States “that weak states ... can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states. Poverty does not make poor people into terrorists and murderers. Yet poverty, weak institutions, and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders.”<sup>4</sup> Long recognized by the international community as the single most-impooverished continent and for its weak governmental institutions, Africa's clear potential to become a breeding ground for new terrorist threats thus landed it a new place on the U.S. foreign policy

agenda. Air Force Gen. Jeffrey Kohler, the director of plans and policy at the U.S. European Command, which has responsibility for Africa, added, "What we don't want to see in Africa is another Afghanistan, a cancer growing in the middle of nowhere."<sup>5</sup>

The September 11 attacks, moreover, have brought new international, not just U.S., attention to the potential security threats posed by failed or collapsed states as epicenters of crime, disease, terrorism, and instability more generally, demonstrated by NATO deputy supreme allied commander Adm. Sir Ian Forbes's assertion that "[t]he strategic context in which we find ourselves has changed dramatically since 11 September 2001. Future threats come not from conquering states, but from failed or failing ones and from catastrophic technologies in the hands of embittered minorities."<sup>6</sup> This rationale goes a long way to explain why Bush, arguably more than any other U.S. president, has elevated Africa in his rhetoric and in the more concrete terms of aid and access to trade with the proposed \$5 billion increase in annual aid through the establishment of the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) and the United States' \$15 billion initiative to fight AIDS. The Bush administration has also overseen efforts to integrate Africa's economies into the global economy through the extension of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) beyond 2008; the June 2004 signing of the free-trade agreement (FTA) with Morocco; and the proposed FTA with the member states (Namibia, South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana, and Swaziland) of the Southern African Customs Union.

Following his meeting with President Festus Mogae of Botswana during his trip, Bush commented, "We both understand that we must work together to share intelligence, to cut off money, to forever deny terrorists a chance to plot and plan and hurt those of us who love freedom."<sup>7</sup> Yet, understanding the relationship between Africa and terrorism so that effective policies can be established to address it will require that U.S. and African policymakers go beyond simple platitudes about shared interests and that they engage in difficult discussions about how to increase the ability of African states to command their own territories.

While the White House continues to pledge more aid to fight terrorism and steadily increases its military footprint on the continent, Africa's actions to deal with terrorism have been both slow and limited. Unsurprisingly, African leaders have preferred to equate the war against terrorism primarily

**F**ailed states were recognized post-9/11 as epicenters of terrorism and instability.

with the war to end poverty and, to this end, to receive greater assistance. As Tanzania's president, Benjamin Mkapa, has argued, "It is futile, if not foolhardy, to think there is no link between poverty and terrorism."<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the relationship between poverty and terrorism is not as clear as African leaders might prefer. Poverty alone does not foster terrorist movements, and extraordinary poverty is something with which Africans have long managed to cope. Rather, a sense of growing frustration with the lack of opportunity is inevitable on a continent that has failed to keep pace with global economic growth, even compared to other areas of the developing world.

Moreover, strict conditionalities, long a source of contention between Africa and the West, will remain on new aid disbursements. During his Africa tour, Bush said that the MCA would provide aid to countries with governments "that rule justly, root out corruption, encourage entrepreneurship, and invest in the health and education of their people." Countries making these changes, he said, would get more help from America: more foreign investment, more trade, and more jobs.<sup>9</sup> Dealing with the problem of poverty in Africa is key to providing long-term security to Africans. This begets a key question in the relationship between Africa and the West: What forms of intervention are most appropriate in securing Western interests and satisfying African demands? In so doing, how can external parties, as well as African recipients, avoid the corrupting psychology and limited benefits of traditional forms of aid? Extending state authority and governance must be the principal response to Africa's internal and external forms of terrorism, but this may demand giving African militaries and police forces greater resources to defeat insurgents, local as well as foreign.

### **Beyond Poverty: Addressing State Weakness**

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The defining characteristic of many African states, and a critical issue in combating terrorist activity, is their weakness. By the 1990s, reportedly one-third of sub-Saharan African states were afflicted by low state capacity,<sup>10</sup> an inability to exercise control and authority over their rural regions or to their borders. The boundaries of African countries have never been determined by how far these states can extend their power; they were imposed by colonial rulers and have been retained by African political elites.<sup>11</sup>

Globalization has, at least temporarily, exacerbated the weakness of African states, not least because it has generated new debates within countries, exposing government failure and corruption, increasing pressure on government to reform, and creating a cause around which opposition can rally. The spread of such openness and transparency poses challenges to the client-oriented and autocratic nature of many African economies.

Key to establishing a strong partnership between Western powers and African governments to combat terrorism is the fact that addressing the pervasiveness of state weakness on the continent tackles the conditions that give rise both to domestic and international terrorist movements. Yet, there is no exact correlation between state weakness or failure and terrorist activity; indeed, it may be argued that terrorism requires key governance and infrastructure attributes (such as regular air flights and reliable communications and banking systems) to operate effectively beyond just simply offering lawless safe havens. Moreover, the conventional wisdom that such states play host to terrorists beyond the reach of the law is subject to debate. Collapsed states also play host to drug lords and warlords who may be competitors rather than collaborators. Their lawlessness and violent nature makes them inevitably difficult environments from which and in which to operate. They are dangerous especially for foreigners, are exposed to international counterterrorist action, and are difficult settings in which to maintain neutrality and partisanship, without which outsiders can themselves become embroiled in local disputes and politics.<sup>12</sup> Although complete state failure can create anarchic environments that are not ideal for terrorists, weak states, quasi-states, or those in crisis can provide the ideal environment for terrorist organizations. In other words, working out of Nairobi is preferable to working out of Mogadishu, or Dakar to Monrovia.<sup>13</sup>

**African leaders prefer to equate the war against terrorism with the war to end poverty.**

Given the pervasiveness of state weakness, there is, however, overlap between the conditions that give rise to domestic terror and the international movements. First, Africa's weak states offer sanctuary and succor to terrorist movements from within Africa and without. In addition to offering stopover points and safe havens for terrorist movements, Africa's weak central government authority can provide a route for bypassing international banking systems and financial scrutiny. The relative absence of local authority not only allows external actors to use African territories as safe havens but also permits indigenous paramilitary groups to terrorize local populations. Many African states are so weak that nonstate actors terrorizing civilians is a viable military strategy and is easier than developing an army to fight states. At the same time, some international terrorists may also see ungoverned parts of Africa as safe havens or as places that provide opportunities for attacking Americans and other Western targets on the continent.

Second, beyond the sanctuary that weak states provide, widespread conditions of conflict and poverty create a breeding ground for alienation and

radicalization, thereby providing potential recruits to the cause of terrorist groups. Finally, Africa has 250 million Muslims, comprising 40 percent of the continent's population. Until now, the key terrorist threats in Africa have come from areas where African states adjoin the Arab world. Despite this fact, the United States remains particularly concerned about states with large Muslim populations such as Nigeria, Tanzania, and Ivory Coast. Traditional African religions, however, are historically the ones that are more closely linked to insurgent warfare on the continent, such as with the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda. By comparison, sub-Saharan Africa's Muslim communities largely draw on the moderate Suwarian tradition of Sufi Islam, although new strains and influences are present.<sup>14</sup> As one commentator has noted:

[It is] alarming [to see] the spread of rigid forms of Islam, which are historically rare south of the Sahara and which are creating division, chaos, and violence in both East and West Africa. Islamists in Kenya are pushing to expand Islamic law, or *shari'a*, to include sentences of amputation in certain crimes, as well as stoning in cases of adultery, practices already in place in Nigeria. The chairman of Kenya's Council of Imams and Preachers, Ali Shee, has warned that Muslims in the coastal and northeastern provinces will break away if *shari'a* is not expanded. Tanzania is experiencing a similar push for Islamic law.<sup>15</sup>

All these forces—a large number of weak and failing states, porous borders, widespread poverty, political frustration, religious radicalism, and repression—combine to create an environment in which the kind of alienation and radicalism that can foster both domestic and international terrorism thrives. The war on terrorism waged since the September 11 attacks has brought the implications of such conditions for global terrorism to the attention of Western policymakers. Former Clinton administration assistant secretary of state for Africa Susan Rice testified before the U.S. Congress in November 2001 that “Africa is unfortunately the world's soft underbelly for global terrorism.”<sup>16</sup>

How to toughen the African state remains problematic, particularly given the poor record of aid delivery on the continent and the resistance of Africans to external conditionalities. The fact that the weak nature of the African state and the corruptibility of the African political class have over time made the continent a soft target for all kinds of terrorist groups is further complicated in an environment where wars of liberation have left a certain residue of ambiguity about the distinction between terrorists and freedom fighters and a latent hostility toward the West over colonial and postcolonial policies. Whatever the debates about the links among weak states, poverty, and terrorism, can the policies of the Western and African states intersect to fight both local and global terrorism?

## Prospects for Cooperation against Terrorism

### WHAT AFRICA HAS CONTRIBUTED TO THE WAR ON TERRORISM

African countries were quick to condemn the September 11 terrorist attacks. South African president Thabo Mbeki said at the time, "The South African government unreservedly denounces these senseless and horrific terrorist attacks and joins the world in denouncing these dastardly acts."<sup>17</sup> Others from Sudan's Omar el-Bashir to Nigeria's Olusegun Obasanjo and even Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe were also quick to offer their cooperation to combat global terrorism.

Nevertheless, rhetoric has not matched reality. Some initial, token measures were certainly taken immediately. Pretoria quickly forwarded a list of the names of individuals with possible links to the September 11 suspects. Earlier, in June 2001 the extradition and mutual legal assistance treaty between South Africa and the United States signed in 1999 had come into force, signaling closer legal and criminal cooperation. Elsewhere, the Algerian government immediately forwarded two lists to U.S. authorities: one with the names of 350 suspected Islamic militants linked to Al Qaeda and another with 1,000 known Algerian terrorists active in the West.

The reality of African actions in cracking down on terrorism has not entirely matched this early promise. Of 53 North and sub-Saharan African countries, only seven—Egypt, Eritrea, Kenya, Djibouti, Uganda, Morocco, and Ethiopia—have joined the global war on terrorism; and as of April 2004, only five—Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, and Sudan—had signed all 12 international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism.<sup>18</sup> After the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, African states adopted the African Convention on Terrorism, but the signing and ratification process has been slow. African countries apparently lack resources as well as political will in dealing with external terrorism, reflecting alternative priorities.

It is critical to understand that African leaders are primarily concerned about fighting local terrorists, whereas Westerners are often more concerned with those terrorists who threaten Western interests and happen to operate in Africa. These positions are not necessarily contradictory, but they produce nuances that must be understood in the context of African domestic priorities.

The defining characteristic of many African states is their weakness.

On a visit to the United States in November 2001, Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika remarked, "Terrorism is one and indivisible. If we are going to combat terrorism, we must do it together."<sup>19</sup> Although this statement may be diplomatically expedient, any strategy to deal with terrorism in Africa should distinguish between local terrorism and the kind carried out through international links, between the terrorism and coercion of a civilian population carried out by local armies or militias and the operations of movements such as Al Qaeda. Although strengthening and extending local state authority and improving governance should contribute to dealing with local and external forms of terrorism, any approach must recognize the danger that the pretext of counterterrorism could subvert domestic democracy.

### **WANTED: STATE SUPPORT**

In the short term, military action informed by sophisticated analysis of the domestic situation is pivotal. The U.S. military has already targeted key African countries to provide austere camps or airfields for U.S. troops, currently stationed in Europe, to rotate more frequently into the African continent. Such antiterrorism-based "lily pads" would enable U.S. troops to deploy readily and quickly into African trouble spots where U.S. interests are threatened.

Yet, cooperation must go beyond military measures and extend to intelligence gathering and information collection as well as management, training, and networking with African militaries. Appropriate national legislation will also need to be drawn up and coordinated, both between African states themselves and in their relationship with key external partners such as the United States. The creation of the African Union initiative—the African Institute for the Study and Research on Terrorism—is a step in this direction. Established in Algiers in September 2002, the institute aims to "centralize information, studies, and analyses on terrorism and terrorist groups and develop training programs by organizing, with the assistance of international partners, training schedules, meetings, and symposia."<sup>20</sup>

Ultimately, a truly effective campaign against the domestic sources of terrorism in Africa requires enhancing the ability of African states to wield authoritative force—the very defining characteristic of the state. Fighting terrorism in Africa thus demands not only the capacity of the West to mount the occasional spectacular raid but also to manage the much more mundane task of rebuilding the police forces in African countries. African leaders are much more concerned about this issue than they are about the deployment of U.S. special operations units on their territory.

Most African police forces are in dismal shape: they lack funding, have large cadres of untrained personnel, rely on outdated methods, are tasked



with repression, and are intent on extortion rather than detection. Yet, local police are critical in the fight against terrorism, both to collect intelligence to prevent attacks and, if attacks do occur, as first responders. Western agencies have shied away from helping Africa's police forces because of their poor human rights records. Indeed, African statistical agencies, central banks, and trade ministries have often received far more Western assistance than local law enforcement agencies have, even though many of these agencies would be unable to function without police security protection against terrorist acts.

More generally, the West finally will have to come to grips with the profound domestic and unique security threats that many African countries face. Africa's internal forms of terrorism require foreign engagement that builds the security forces of the state as the most effective responses to the problem of weak states in a time of global terrorism. Until peace in Africa can be secured and local government authority strengthened, global efforts to deal with terrorist networks will continue to toil.

To avoid empowering states that might abuse their power to govern or to wield force, not just any capacity should be built; to rid the continent of the kinds of conditions that breed the societal alienation and radicalism that give rise to terrorism in the long term, democracy and civil society must be promoted in Africa. It is astonishing how quickly and with how comparatively little fanfare African states have embraced multiparty democracy as the only acceptable form of government over the last decade. More than 40 African countries regularly hold multiparty elections, although less than half this number has passed the ultimate test of democracy: a peaceful change in government through the polls. Indeed, Africa needs further democratization, a goal fully endorsed by the African polity but one that will meet with greater resistance from those elites who are either not elected or elected in contests that are obviously not fully free and fair.

Historically, Western governments have limited their military assistance to African states to peacekeeping efforts. European nongovernmental organizations, which increasingly dictate that continent's foreign policy toward Africa, approach every war with the assumption that the only solution is conflict resolution. Fighting terrorists, however, should not exclude the same military logic used by the West when fighting terrorists who threaten Western interests. Bush's \$100 million commitment made in 2003 to fight terrorism in Africa has to be backed up by a commitment to building state capacity, including the continent's militaries and police forces.

**Weak, not failed, states provide an ideal environment for terrorist organizations.**

**African leaders are primarily concerned about fighting local, not international, terrorists.**

Thus, Bush's East Africa Counter-Terrorism Initiative has dedicated resources to improve police and judicial counterterrorist capabilities in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. This program provides training and some equipment for counterterrorism units, as well as support for senior-level African decisionmakers and legislators concerned with drafting legislation on terrorist financing and money laundering. Similarly, the

aim of Washington's \$7 million Sahel initiative is to assist Mali, Mauritania, Chad, and Niger "in protecting their borders, combating terrorism, and enhancing regional stability" and to "encourage the participating countries to cooperate with each other against smuggling and trafficking in persons, as well as in the sharing of information."<sup>21</sup> The form of such assistance will be crucial in determining its success at creating local capacity.

The use of embedded foreign support of local police forces, militaries, and bureaucracies may offer a sustainable, more effective, and less expensive option for long-term capacity building.<sup>22</sup>

There are, moreover, dangers that such security measures may, at least in the short term, exacerbate the conditions that give rise to external and internal terrorism in the first place. For example, the welfare of thousands of Somali families has been affected by the United States' November 2001 decision to freeze the assets of Somalia's largest financial company, al-Barakaat, because of its alleged association with Al Qaeda through links with the local Islamic movement, Al-Ittihad al-Islamiya. Given the Somalis' dependence on remittances from the Somalia diaspora, the measure has proved to be hugely damaging to Somali families and the image of the United States alike.<sup>23</sup> The danger also exists that certain U.S.-led initiatives, such as the container security initiative inspection scheme,<sup>24</sup> constitute a major and highly intrusive intervention into the way states run their affairs. Such measures may provide an incentive for African leaders to improve governance conditions but could also fuel anti-American and anti-Western sentiment in the process.

In the longer term, however, dealing with terrorism in Africa requires fundamentally changing the conditions of lawlessness and alienation that empower leaders to terrorize their own citizens and enable movements such as Al Qaeda to acquire a substantial following. The United States will find Africa a somewhat receptive partner to demands for changes in fundamental conditions. NEPAD's focus is in accord with efforts to address the roots of terrorism. African countries will also be happy to accept the additional foreign aid that the Bush administration has promised in the proposal. The

administration's aforementioned \$5 billion increase in annual aid through the 2002 MCA program and the \$15 billion initiative to fight AIDS—potentially the greatest, future single source of state collapse and lawlessness in Africa—is a first step in the right direction.

Finally, the promotion of democratic values and state capacity should go hand in hand with a diplomatic strategy to reach out to Africa's Muslim communities and negate the stereotyping prevalent, particularly the perception that Islam is a force only for militancy. Islam is far from a monolithic religious force throughout the continent. Rather, distinct Islamic practices characterize Africa's various regions, reflecting their historical traditions and origins. Radical Islam may have minimal resonance in Africa, but its continued moderation will require a need to enhance enduring traditions of tolerance among the continent's religious communities to avoid division and radicalization through outside influence, including that of Saudi-sponsored mosques encouraging a more extreme Wahhabi interpretation of Islam in Nigeria and South Africa. With around 70 million Muslims and fed by outside influences along with local ethnic and regional rivalries, relations between these communities in Nigeria in particular remain fragile. There have been several localized outbursts of internecine violence in northern Nigeria, including the attempts to stop the November 2002 Miss World pageant.

Whatever their differences in emphasis, the United States has found Africa a somewhat receptive partner to demands for changes in fundamental conditions that give rise to domestic terrorism sources and allow external forms of terrorism to take root. The events of September 11 have led to greater engagement on the problems of African development and the related challenges of Western engagement. For all of the problems of poverty, violence, and corruption in African countries, the importance of the policy reforms and achievements that have been made on the continent should not be understated.

### **Post-9/11 Prospects for State Building**

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Although African responses toward U.S. policies in the war on terrorism (including the U.S. decision to go to war in Iraq) have been mixed and African and Western leaders maintain disparate priorities when it comes to combating terrorism, the September 11 terrorist attacks and the emergence of the global war on terrorism initially brought unprecedented international attention to Africa's problems that seemed bound to prove beneficial to the continent.

Subsequently, the U.S.-led war in Iraq has threatened to remove Africa and especially NEPAD, its homegrown governance and development plan, from the international spotlight and the assistance its challenges require.

**Democracy and civil society must be promoted in Africa.**

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Events in Iraq and the war on terrorism elsewhere around the globe have highlighted the importance of not allowing African states to collapse. Thus, continued and expanded access to global markets through initiatives such as the U.S. AGOA has improved the prospects for African development and stability, though questions still remain about the economic sustainability of

preferential market access. Despite the schizophrenic nature of Western responses to Africa's development needs—vacillating between protectionism through domestic subsidies and greater access to trade and more aid—there has arguably been much more generous and proactive engagement by the Bush administration than by any of its predecessors, the Clinton administration included. Clearly, the

September 11 attacks also reshaped the administration's view of Africa's strategic value.

Overall, Washington's hunger for allies and its recognition of the need for African stability, in light of the potential for the wider spillover of transnational terrorism generated in Africa, has created a unique opportunity for African states to use the new attention to and comprehension of Africa's strategic importance to increase assistance and help realize NEPAD's ambitious goals of enabling Africa's stability, prosperity, and renaissance.

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