

Counter-Terrorism Efforts in Pan-Saharan Africa

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To

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In order to effectively prosecute the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), the United States must focus on Africa in the near term. Keeping with our preemptive strategy regarding nations that facilitate or harbor terrorist groups this focus of effort must change in the next five years if the US is to avoid a protracted war in Africa. In the last few decades, terrorist groups originating in Africa have conducted multiple attacks on everything from US military targets to tourism infrastructure. Many of the countries in the Horn of Africa (HOA), Sahel region, and Pan-Saharan regions have significant Muslim populations and weak central governments. Historically, these factors, among others, make nations susceptible to extremism and terrorist groups. Once these ideologies take root among the civilian populations in their mosques and political centers, they have proven difficult to influence. Recent efforts in Afghanistan show that even when extremist groups like the Taliban are "defeated" the ideology remains and will in time resurface. In October of 2007 the US officially launched US Africa Command (AFRICOM) in order to avoid strategic gaps that were inherent when Africa was divided among US European Command (EUCOM), Central Command (CENTCOM), and Pacific Command (PACOM). AFRICOM is starting to address the emerging terrorist threat in Africa, however, with the focus of US military efforts still in Iraq and

Afghanistan, the resources and manpower are inadequate to begin any real effective counter-terrorism effort. The US military must increase Security Cooperation Marine air-ground task force (SC-MAGTF) deployments, increase building infrastructure in unstable areas, and develop working relationships with local leaders in the Trans-Saharan region of Africa to avoid a protracted conflict with Africa in the future.

Background

Trans-Saharan Africa contains a diverse population with a wide range of government from the stable democracy to the volatile failed state. Countries in the Trans-Saharan region include: Senegal, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti. This region stretches from Africa's east coast in Somalia to its west coast in Senegal. Most of these countries face broad social and economic problems such as famine and unemployment, making it historically easier for religious extremism and terrorist groups to take root. Furthermore, most have weak central governments that function only in the capital city and possibly in the surrounding areas. These centralized governments have little control over their borders thus leaving a power vacuum for whoever wants to gain control over the rural areas. Warlords and criminal gangs exploit this lack of control by smuggling

goods and people through these porous borders using a well established network. These organizations are enablers for terrorist groups in that they are either complicit with them operating in their territory or they seek to profit from the terrorists in exchange for freedom of movement across their borders.

The people in Trans-Saharan Africa are as diverse as anywhere else in Africa. Myriad tribes, local religions, families, and nationalities that make governing in these countries all the more difficult. Countries like Sudan have a 70% Sunni Muslim population and their official language is Arabic, while countries such as Ethiopia are mostly Christian and speak a mixture of local tribal dialects. This diversity means that regions in each country must be planned for individually with a focus on that area's language and culture for any foreign aid or counter-terrorism efforts to be successful. Foreign influences in Trans-Saharan Africa play a large role in how the US will be perceived. Colonial efforts by Great Britain, France, and the Dutch still have a negative effect on how governments in this area view foreign aid. Leaders do not want to be seen as weak when it comes to dealing with the US and other European nations. However, they also see opportunity when the US offers financial and military aid for

both their country and themselves. Consequently, corruption is rampant in government here and often money given by the US ends up in the pockets of politicians and warlords instead of its intended purpose. Therefore, through the military, any efforts on counterterrorism must use a hands-on approach with extensive supervision.

SC-MAGTF

In response to the current operational environment, the Marine Corps is going to start staffing security cooperation MAGTFs (SC-MAGTF) in order to more effectively fight the Global War on Terrorism. These units will resemble the current Marine Expeditionary Units (MEU) but will be optimized for security cooperation. The idea is that these SC-MAGTFs would deploy to a forward operating site and then send scalable units out to operate in the area of responsibility. Units throughout the Marine Corps would be assigned an area of the world to focus on for training. Furthermore, the SC-MAGTF would be supplemented with personnel such as a Foreign Area Officer (FAO) and a Regional Area Officer (RAO). The SC-MAGTF would be an effective way of reinforcing the US current Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI). The TSCTI was launched in June 2005 with the military component falling under Operation Enduring Freedom -Trans Sahara (OEF-TS). SC-MAGTFs would be able to deploy to

Camp Lemonier in Djibouti and from there break into smaller units and operate across the Trans Saharan region. Company or even platoon size units could train and operate with host nation partners to establish working relationships and trust. By establishing a dedicated SC-MAGTF rotation to Africa, the US would demonstrate a long term commitment to the region and thus encourage countries in the Trans Saharan region to dedicate more of their resources to the counterterrorism effort.

On the other hand some believe that the terror threat in Africa has been largely exaggerated. The actual number of active members in groups like the Al Qaeda linked Group for Preaching and Combat range from 200-300 in some parts of Nigeria to an estimated 1000 in the Horn of Africa. These numbers taken by themselves may seem insignificant, however, it is not the immediate strength of these groups that causes concern. The conditions in these countries make terror experts worry. Therefore, it is important to think in the big picture and to think long term. The US must prevent conflicts and set conditions in Trans Saharan Africa in order to avoid looking at much larger numbers of actual active members in these terrorist groups in the near future.

Infrastructure

Lack of infrastructure alone does not promote extremism or make it easier for terrorist groups to take root. However, lack of certain types of infrastructure coupled with the presence of other services and activities give an ideal environment to both criminals and extremist ideologies. For example, the presence of banking networks and the lack of banking regulation make it much easier for terrorist groups to move money around to finance operations. Furthermore, with only five percent of the population owning a phone and 37 percent without electricity, Trans Saharan Africa becomes a very permissive place to operate. The regions expansive rural areas also do not have adequate road networks. This tends to isolate vast border areas from government reach and to allow warlords to control these populations. These warlords in turn begin making profits any way possible to include taking money from terrorist organizations in exchange for freedom to operate in their territory.

Trans-Sahara

The US must begin to focus more resources efforts on Pan-Saharan Africa in order to stem the tide of terrorism taking root. The military already has a presence in the form of AFRICOM, however, a more concerted effort must be made to work on infrastructure and building working relationships with

leaders at every level. The advantage we have in Africa is that we are not trying to build relationships after major combat operations as in Iraq and Afghanistan. We can start on at a peaceful level and work to prevent terrorist groups from becoming a threat.

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