



## Aspen Security Forum Panel – Africa: The Next Hotbed of Terrorism?

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Selected CSIS Remarks

Featuring:

- *Jennifer Cooke*, Director, CSIS Africa Program
- *General Carter Ham*, President, Association of the U.S. Army; Former Commander, U.S. Africa Command; Advisory Board Member, CSIS Arc of Instability Node III

[Full transcript of the discussion [here](#); video of the conference [here](#).]

MR. ERIC SCHMITT (NEW YORK TIMES): Jennifer, you've spent a lot of time recently in Nigeria, you're about to head back over there again. That has commanded attention, obviously, with the new government that actually had quite a lot of hopes, raised hopes among U.S. analysts, U.S. military was cooperating much better than under General Ham's, some of the obstacles you ran into. What are you looking at as you go—as you prepare for this next trip to Nigeria and then looking—how does that kind of look out over the broader region, some of the issues you've taken on?

MS. JENNIFER COOKE (CSIS): I actually think there's been some significant advances against Boko Haram, and it began really in the last six months of the previous regime. But it is getting squeezed, it is definitely weakened. There are a lot of people taken out, equipment, solar panels, a lot of their logistics, their people are driving mopeds, not Volkswagen Golfs. They're riding horses even or bicycles. But the group has reverted to asymmetrical attacks on really the softest of targets using often very young girls—as young as 13—to go into mosques, to go into marketplaces, to go into IDP camps. So they are down, but definitely not out.

I think looking forward, what I think is of concern are three things. One is new alliances, another is new rivalries, and then the third is the overhang of Libya on all of this.

In terms of alliances, General Ham referred to the Boko Haram, AQIM, Al-Shabaab linkages and that's been of great concern. There hasn't been that much—there has been collaboration but not in a way that has really bolstered any of their capacities in a real way.

The other one, though, is new alliances with equally aggrieved groups. And here you have, for example, in Mali, Fulani groups that are traditional herders taking on the extremist mantle and linking up with Ansar Dine or linking up with AQIM. You have a growing sense across West Africa of Fulani solidarity and grievance. In Nigeria, there've been a whole slew of deadly attacks by Fulani herdsmen against farming communities. That's a kind of network that it would make sense for a weakened Boko Haram or an AQIM to try to tap into and to try to make common cause with.

The third kind of alliance is one with the center—Al-Qaeda central and ISIL. All three groups—Al-Shabaab, AQIM, and Boko Haram—at moments when they were under pressure is when they pledged allegiance to those groups. And again, it's not been significant collaboration, there's been some technical

assistance, perhaps some training. It's definitely boosted their brand in a way, but so far marginally. But as those groups, Al-Qaeda and ISIL, come under pressure and as their regional affiliates come under pressure, the incentives to collaborate more deeply might grow. And that could be difficult.

On rivalries. I think we've always thought of alliances as a big fear, but I think rivalries can be equally dangerous as these multiple groups compete for profile and when armed propaganda and spectacular attacks are the currency –

MR. SCHMITT: As we saw in the hotel bombings.

MS. COOKE: Exactly, in Grand-Bassam. I mean, Al-Qaeda was very much weakened at that point, but launching an attack against Grand-Bassam in Cote d'Ivoire, where it never had a presence before, made it seem ubiquitous and very powerful. And that kind of rivalry, whether it plays out among local affiliates or it trickles down from the Al-Qaeda-ISIL competition could be quite dangerous.

And then the third thing that I was going to talk about is Libya. I'll just say very briefly, Libya and the presence of Al-Qaeda and ISIL there bring all of this very much closer to these multiple players. Right now, Libya is something of a magnet for fighters who are coming under pressure in Northern Nigeria or in Mali –

MR. SCHMITT: Or even Syria and Iraq where ISIS is saying, "Go there, you can't get here."

MS. COOKE: Exactly right, it's becoming a spillover for them.

But if there is a settlement [in Libya], a peaceful settlement or an intervention of some kind, it becomes vent, and it spews out fighters, arms, ideologies, foreign fighters into a region that is very unprepared to accept them.

One last point that I think is important to make: We tend to focus on violent extremist groups as the main players in all of this, but they are only one among many players, whether it's ethno-nationalists; whether it's secession movements, whether it's criminal networks trafficking arms, people, drugs, wildlife; and there are personal rivalries. So you have this whole infrastructure of conflict that VEOs are embedded in. And state authorities are often implicated in that as well, whether at the local or national levels. So it's not enough just to extend the state, it has to be a fundamental change in how the state governs.

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MR. SCHMITT: Jennifer, talk a little bit more about this idea of increasing both rivalries and growing alliances perhaps about various different groups on the ground. Are they sensing and exploiting these divisions, these weaknesses in government factions and maybe not necessarily places like Libya, but elsewhere in the continent?

MS. COOKE: Yes, well in Kenya, Al-Shabaab has made a deliberate attempt to instigate ethnic rivalries along the coast within Kenya, trying to –exploit anti-Muslim sentiment – to try to unify those groups in a way, and bring them on-side as the marginalized and the oppressed.

In Mali, it's complicated, because a single person can belong to multiple groups: a drug trafficking group, an armed group, a political group. I mean, members of the MUJAO, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa –

MR. SCHMITT: These are all running in parallel or are they –

MS. COOKE: Well, they joined forces with AQIM, but there a number of drug traffickers among them, many of them now morphed back to become one of the political groups that sits at the negotiation table. So, the distinctions are often hard to make, but there is kind of a one-upmanship among them.

Even the In Amenas facility attack by Mokhtar Belmokhtar – was an attempt to distinguish himself and set Al-Mourabitoun apart from the others. So there is a constant friction of alliances and rivalries, fragmentation and rejoining that even when they're weakened, I think, makes it easy for them to regenerate.

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MR. SCHMITT: So we're obviously in a presidential season, after the election there'll be transition teams; they are already assembling now. I want to put you all on the spot. We're very quickly talking about whether it's you're preparing Africa position papers for the transition, for whether it's a Trump presidency or a Clinton presidency – what are going to be your one or two top items for the incoming president's administration, whether it's continuity of effort now but maybe breaking 17 out, this is an opportunity to do something different. Starting with Carter, we'll just go down the line here before we go to questions.

MR. CARTER HAM: Yeah, so I said here in 2013 that any U.S. foreign policy that ignores one-seventh of the world's population is probably doomed to fail. That's even more true if you say a quarter of the globe's population. So I think keeping Africa on the agenda is an important consideration. And from a countering terrorism, countering violent extremism, to me, the keyword is partnership and enabling African capabilities through the AU and other auspices.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, I think – look, I think we have to keep building the capacities here, but I think simply focusing our efforts on countering the violent extremist manifestation of insecurity doesn't get us very far. You have to think of the drug trafficking; you have to think of the wildlife trafficking; you have to think of all these other enabling things, and you have to push the governments involved to tackle these things as well, not reinforce their tendency to just take the assistance where they can and fight the U.S. enemy. So that's important. I think also the institutional changes in militaries are needed, but also the ethics of the military, and the cultural practice, and the engagement with communities is critically important; and embedding a sense of counter-insurgency tactics in here. A third thing would be much better tracking on the financial flows that keep these groups afloat. Boko Haram, I mean, they have 250 girls that any number of players would pay millions of dollars for, but they have not ransomed them. What does that tell us? They probably have independent sources of financing, and I think that's important to track.

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MR. AL CANNON (AUDIENCE): Thank you, great presentation there. Al Cannon, Sheriff at Charleston County, South Carolina. To what extent – the media has not said a whole lot recently about the issue of piracy – but to what extent does that continue to be a problem? And if it is less so, what accounts for the diminished status of that?

MR. SCHMITT: Jennifer?

MS. COOKE: Sure. Off the Gulf of Aden, off of Somalia, piracy has diminished considerably and that's the result of a couple of things. One is a naval joint taskforce, a multi-national force that has been patrolling the waters. But probably the most essential thing has been just basic measures that ship owners have

taken as they travel through there like: don't slow down, have someone on watch [Laughter] use a fire hose, I mean just very basic things, or go another route.

What's interesting though is that piracy and robbery – or I think it's a slightly different term if the ship's at anchor – in West Africa has grown more problematic. And there, people are less after the ransom money, like the Somali pirates were, and more after the cargo and the ships. So they have much less compunction in killing people on the ships. So I think piracy has gone down in our national consciousness, but I think maritime security, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea, is still of pressing importance.

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MR. JAY CAMERON (AUDIENCE): My question's for Jennifer. You mentioned that the Nigerian military has had some success in taking ground from Boko Haram; one of the challenges is holding that ground. Do you see a role for sustainable community development in building resiliency of these communities as a way to help hold that ground? A military plus a coordinated aid effort as well?

MS. COOKE: Well, yes. I think one of the aspects, particularly in Northeast Nigeria, is that local government is completely absent. So communities have very little say and very little contact with the government, very little opportunity to select their leaders and set their priorities. And so I think, focusing on that very local, even municipal governance structure is important.

Also though, in terms of engagement with the military, it's never going to be possible to patrol the entire Sahel or patrol all of Borno State. But you need much better and quicker communication and exchange of information between communities and the military--and a military ability to respond quickly in that. That requires building trust.

But then there's also the livelihood aspect and the local reconciliation aspect of it as well. Many of these, (in the Sahel in particular) – many of these conflicts arise out of very localized competition between communities living very close together. And so, building cooperation and consensus and more social cohesion among those communities is critically important as well.

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MR. JOHN McLAUGHLIN (AUDIENCE): For the whole panel. John McLaughlin, former Deputy Director at CIA and now at Johns Hopkins University. I wonder if the panel could reflect a moment on this. At some point, hopefully, ISIS gets driven out of its territorial strongholds in Iraq and Syria. It appears they have a plan for what to do and where to go at that point and I wonder to what extent you think Africa figures in that plan and particularly Libya, where they are under some pressure and can they be defeated in Libya where they appear to have a particularly well-developed stronghold?

MS. COOKE: We kind of agreed that all questions on Libya would go to the General.

*[Laughter]*

MR. HAM: Oh thank you, yeah. So I think absolutely. There are wide swaths of territory that are ungoverned or under-governed in Africa, so an ISIL or any other organization under pressure looking for a new safe haven, if you will, will look for those kinds of areas. That's why it is all the more important for the U.S., for our allies and partners to work very diligently with the African Union, with individual African nations to help them form the kind of governance, the kind of security forces that make it increasingly difficult for ISIL or any other organization to establish a new foothold.

The presence of ISIL in Libya, I think is particularly problematic, though there are some positive indicators that the Libyans themselves are becoming increasingly intolerant of ISIL's presence. And that's what it takes. It takes people, it takes a government to say, "We won't tolerate that within our boundaries." And they may need a little help, will certainly require regional cooperation, but I think it's a very, very valid concern, John, to say, "Where does ISIL go next and when under pressure in Iraq and Syria?"

MS. COOKE: I also think, outside of Libya, I mean, it's not particularly attractive to set up camp north of Timbuktu. I mean, if you've ever been there, it's – I don't think people are raging to get there or to Somalia where things are a little chaotic. But it could be a temporary haven and holding ground. Ultimately and I think cordoning off, helping those countries insulate themselves from outflow from Libya is going to be important.

MR. HAM: So two seconds just to follow-up on that. I think the other thing that we may be seeing is that terrorist organizations have recognized that when they operate in isolated space, they are then vulnerable to U.S. and other collection and targeting. So we may see them hide in plain view, so a place like a megacity, Lagos, a place like that may unfortunately be a new safe haven, if you will, for a terrorist organization.

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MR. ALEX HACKWORTH (AUDIENCE): You have all focused on building governance structures and partner capacity. But given kind of the U.S. track record in doing that and our effectiveness and the sustainability of that, what lessons have we observed or learned over the last 10, 15 years and how can we apply those in the future given that that's kind of fundamental to what you're saying the future U.S. policy should be in Africa? Thank you.

MR. HAM: So from a military standpoint, I think that African Union Mission in Somalia is an example. Working through the African Union with U.S. and other nation's support offers I think a good indicator of what might work in the future.

MS. COOKE: From the Cold War, I think we learned a lot of lessons from focusing on U.S. narrow security interests to the exclusion of issues like human rights, democracy, or inclusive governance. And I think that's where, even as the U.S. partners militarily with some of these countries, it has to make very clear that it also stands in solidarity with civil society groups, with communities and so forth. And I think you have to be able to speak those two messages equally credibly and we've had kind of mixed success on that, I think.