



Terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa

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THE MASS EXODUS OF SYRIAN REFUGEES GRIPPED THE WORLD'S ATTENTION IN 2015. Thousands of civilians fled the civil war and navigated treacherous waters and hostile borders to reach safety in Europe. In a strategically vital region notorious for political violence, these events drew the world's attention and energy. But even as the fighting rages across Syria, Iraq, and Libya, we must look to the threat posed by escalating terrorism and violence in sub-Saharan Africa.

The 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania resonate with many Americans—it was their first encoun-

ter with al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. As details emerged of bin Laden's earlier training facilities in Sudan, and the participation of East Africans in al-Qaeda, it was clear the region had been overlooked as a more significant threat.

The subsequent September 11, 2001, attacks focused counterterrorism efforts primarily on Afghanistan and Iraq. But signs of sub-Saharan Africa's threat to American security continued to appear. In 2008, the first American suicide bomber, Shirwa Ahmed, killed himself in Somalia at the direction of the terrorist group al-Shabaab. One year later, a young Nigerian man—recruited and

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trained by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula—attempted to destroy an airliner over Detroit on Christmas Day. Despite this, the region has failed to garner sufficient attention beyond efforts such as the U.S.-led Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership.²⁴

Today, sub-Saharan African threats are more widespread, sophisticated, and complicated to address. Three distinct, multistate areas now play host to violent extremist groups with regional ties, as well as some with connections to ISIS and al-Qaeda. These areas include the Sahel (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Mourabitun, and Ansar al-Dine); the Lake Chad Basin (Boko Haram); and the Horn of Africa/Somalia (al-Shabaab). Dozens of local armed groups operate among them.

All three areas began with groups promoting mostly locally contained, pragmatic agendas. They have now spread into more regional, ideologically oriented movements. At various points, these groups gained control of significant territory and dominated licit and illicit trade. Al-Shabaab controlled the southern half of Somalia, funding itself through taxation and the charcoal trade. AQIM and Ansar al-Dine seized northern Mali where trafficking in consumer goods, humans, drugs, and wildlife are rife. Boko Haram erupted across three northern Nigerian

²⁴ For more on the TSCTP, see Lesley Anne Warner, "Nine Questions about the Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership You Were Too Embarrassed to Ask," April 8, 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/04/nine-questions-about-the-trans-sahara-counter-terrorism-partnership-you-were-too-embarrassed-to-ask/>.

states, sustaining itself through kidnapping, trafficking, and a still-nebulous network of local and regional supporters.

All of these groups took advantage of ungoverned or poorly governed areas, imposing their own harsh form of control. From there, they have expanded internationally, drawing inspiration (and in some places, technical and tactical support) from ISIS and al-Qaeda. Boko Haram, for example, has greatly improved its media skills with assistance from ISIS technical experts.

These advances have not gone unnoticed, and regional forces have responded. Kenya is attempting to root out al-Shabaab militants, following attacks on the Westgate shopping mall and Garissa University. A new government in Nigeria has vowed to identify and curb regional and domestic sources of supply and funding for Boko Haram. And recently, more concerted Nigerian efforts, supported by South African contractors and neighboring forces, have pushed Boko Haram out of towns and into camps scattered across the region.

In the Sahel, French and African Union forces (notably from Chad) dispersed militants who controlled the northern half of the country in 2012. But today, violence extends across much of Mali and over the border into the Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

With U.S. interests threatened in the Middle East, many wonder if America can afford to mount a similar campaign in a region with fewer priorities and threats. But this concern is unfounded. The groups in question do not possess the sophistication of ISIS. But they are operating in a much more permissive environment where capacities are low and where corruption is high. The many factors leading to radicalization remain in place, so recruitment potential is elevated. The region remains susceptible to greater instability and violence.

A primary concern is that changes across the Middle East could hasten the movement of fighters to other areas with ongoing conflicts, safe havens, and like-minded groups. Libya has long meddled in sub-Saharan Africa via its long, porous southern border, through which ISIS may one day flee its redoubt in Sirte. Many foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq hail from African countries, and could well make their way to a new battlefield—fortifying existing groups. ISIS has also called on its followers to attack in place if they cannot reach their self-declared Caliphate. That sub-Saharan Africa could be the next center of gravity for jihadist violence is a real possibility.

Any such migration southward by these violent extremists would bring them to countries ill-equipped to handle them. With extremist violence already high, the arrival of battle-hardened fighters from the Middle East would devastate sub-Saharan Africa.

The United States and its partners must not wait for this to happen before shoring up regional capacities. We have to acknowledge that sub-Saharan Africa is not a tier-one priority for the United States. But on top of interests in safeguarding human rights in the region, nations such as Nigeria and Kenya serve as strategic hubs, and drive growth on the continent. America increasingly relies on them militarily, economically, and politically.

The United States should redouble its efforts to prevent sub-Saharan Africa from serving as a place for violent extremists to regroup, exchange ideas, refine technical capacities, and organize. Essential activities include greater border control; hard-nosed diplomacy to stimulate host-nation action; improved and expanded training, equipping, and coordinating of regional forces; extensive programming in countering violent extremism; enhanced intelligence sharing; and economic-development programs to provide youth with a positive future that for many seems out of reach. □