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Introduction: Terrorism and Counter-terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa

by Joel Busher



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One of the most striking features of the way terrorism and counter-terrorism have evolved in Sub-Saharan Africa during the last 3-5 years has been the apparent resilience of terrorist groups to increasingly large-scale national and international responses. As well as the scaling up of domestic counter-terrorism efforts, the African Union has continued to support counter-terrorism both through the various plans and protocols associated with its Counter-Terrorism Framework (see ACSRT) and through the deployment of African Union peacekeeping forces, such as the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM). There has also been substantial bilateral and multilateral support for counter-terrorism efforts in Sub-Saharan Africa by the wider international community, most notably the USA (see Stupart, 2013, Waddington, 2013). Yet in spite of this, several of Sub-Saharan Africa's most prominent terrorist groups have thrived, with Boko Haram resurgent even after a large-scale assault on the group by Nigerian security forces succeeded in killing its leader and around 800 Boko Haram members in 2009 (Agbibo, 2013, Zenn, 2013), and with the attack on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi illustrating only too well that Al Shabaab still has the capability to strike beyond the borders of Somalia.

This points to another striking characteristic of terrorism and counter-terrorism in the region. This is its international nature, and arguably its ongoing internationalisation, of which there are multiple dimensions. Perhaps most obviously, we have seen the incorporation of what were initially national or sub-national terrorist groups into regional and even global networks of terrorists and insurgents, and with this an apparent convergence of collective action frames and strategic goals: Al Shabaab announced its integration into the Al Qaeda network in 2008; although Boko Haram does not appear to have become organisationally integrated with Al Qaeda, its leadership has reached out to other jihadist groups both in Africa and beyond, and its splinter group, Ansaru, cooperates with and comprises at least in part of militants trained by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Roggio, 2013). Other international dimensions of terrorism in this region include the enactment of attacks beyond the boundaries of the countries in which they are based; the specific targeting of foreign (and in particular European or North American) nationals (Zenn, 2013); recruitment among diaspora communities by groups like Al Shabaab (Shinn, 2011, Vidino et al., 2010), a process linked in no small part with the expansion of the online presence of Sub-Saharan African terrorist groups (see Bertram, this volume); the various international flows of financial resources that have supported and sustained these groups (Doukhan, 2013, Vilkkio, 2011); and the spread of violence in the Sahel region through processes of international 'contagion' and 'diffusion' (Shaw, 2013). And as I have already alluded to above, it is not just terrorism activity that has internationalised, but also the counter-terrorism response. Within the international community, the view that has emerged has very much been that which David Cameron articulated after the hostage crisis at the Amenas gas plant, that 'this is a global threat and it will require a global response' (cited in Dowd and Raleigh, 2013).

Yet there are good reasons to be cautious about how the homogenising tendencies of macro-scale analyses of the global terrorism and global responses might shape our understanding of terrorism in the region.



As is the case within any broadly conceived movement, across the myriad jihadist terrorist groups, there are competing interests, ideas, strategic priorities and tactical tastes that can be teased out with detailed empirical analysis. For example, while there may be forms of association and collaboration between groups such as AQIM, Ansar Dine, Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa and the Islamic Movement for the Azawad, these groups have articulated different strategic priorities and have adopted subtly different tactical repertoires (Dowd and Raleigh, 2013). And of course, terrorist actions and counter-terrorism responses are also shaped by local, national and regional social, economic and political particularities. If attempts to counter terrorism are to be effective in reducing the risk of terrorist violence and political violence more broadly for the people living in those parts of Sub-Saharan Africa that have been affected by the diffusion of this wave of terrorist activity, it is essential that scholars and policy-makers alike take the time to unpick these 'myths' (*Ibid.*) about global Islamist terrorism, and to examine how these regional and national particularities influence terrorism and the counter-terrorism response (Whitaker, 2008).

Several of the articles in this special edition, as well as wider scholarship on development and security make clear that one of the key elements of these regional particularities in the case of Sub-Saharan Africa concerns the relationship between the state and the citizen, and in particular public perceptions of the efficacy and legitimacy of state power. How does a state maintain its claims to legitimacy when it appears unable to ensure the delivery of basic public services? Even more to the point, how does a state build and sustain its claims to legitimacy when it is perceived, at least by some segments of society, to be actively working to favour particular religious, ethnic or class-based interests; or when the use of discourses of 'terrorism' and 'counter-terrorism' are themselves interpreted by substantial segments of the population as simply a further extension and abuse of state power? Such diffidence in part reflects the fact that it is all too easy to find examples of states, both colonial and post-colonial, both past and present, which have used the rhetoric of maintaining civic order and of countering terrorism to intimidate internal challengers, quash public dissent and oppress rival political factions. That various national liberation movements were branded 'terrorists' by colonial administrations is a fact that has not been erased from the collective memory, helped in no small measure by the fact that even within living memory, Nelson Mandela was still designated a 'terrorist' not only by South Africa's apartheid administration, but also by the governments of various Western states that continued to support the South African regime. Given this historical context, it is entirely unsurprising that African publics might be suspicious of international intervention in their domestic security and legal affairs (Whitaker, 2007). Anxieties about and suspicion of 'counter-terrorism' also derive from abuses of power carried out in the name of public order and counter-terrorism within some contemporary regimes. In spite of the criticisms of contemporary domestic counter-terrorism in democratic western states, and there are plenty of criticisms that can and have been made, these usually pale in comparison alongside, for example, the excesses reported in Kenya in the aftermath of the Westgate attacks (Howden, 2013, BBC, 19/12/2013), or with claims about the arrest of the partners and children of Boko Haram members by Nigerian security forces (Zenn, this volume). As Whitaker observes, at least part of the problem would appear to be that

For centuries people in democratic countries have argued about the appropriate balance between individual rights and national security. With the spread of anti-terrorism legislation across the globe, this debate between rights and security is also being exported, often to contexts in which the human rights side of the scale has long been neglected. (Whitaker, 2007, 1029)

In one way or another, each of the articles in this volume offers insights about how the evolution of terrorism and counter-terrorism reflects both these processes of internationalisation and the local, national and regional particularities. Abgbibo's article and Sjah's article both deal with the incorporation of Al Shabaab



within the Al Qaeda network and the implications of this for the group's tactics and strategic goals. In Bertram and Ellison's contribution, they present an analysis of the online presence of terrorist groups in Sub-Saharan Africa and how this can inform our understanding of the changing nature of terrorism and terrorist organisation in the region. The articles by Zenn and Pearson, Maiangwa and Nwankpa all address different aspects of the wave of violence associated with Boko Haram in Nigeria. Maiangwa presents an analysis of religious politicisation and the way religion has become an integral part of political fields of contestation in Nigeria. Nwankpa discusses the politics of amnesty, comparing how the politics of amnesty have played out in the case of the Niger Delta insurgency and the Boko Haram insurgency. Zenn and Pearson's article considers gender based violence in the context of terrorist and counter-terrorist activities associated with Boko Haram and the response of the Nigerian state. These articles are supplemented by two opinion pieces. One is a discussion between Amaliya and Nwankpa about the characterisation of Boko Haram, the nature of the threat posed by the group, and possible responses to the crisis provoked by Boko Haram's activities. The other is a discussion by Rekawek, in which he draws attention to fundamental challenges for the international community as it seeks to support African states in their responses to terrorism.

As a final remark, it is worth also briefly saying something about a couple of topics that are missing from this special edition. The fact that the overwhelming focus of this special edition is on jihadist terrorism is hardly surprising given not only the current distribution of terrorist activities in the region, but also the current international focus on this particular wave of terrorist activity and the way it intersects with the interests of key players within the international community. However, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that what might be classed as acts of terrorism have been carried out by groups and individuals who draw from very different ideological wells to those of Al Qaeda affiliates: groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda (Allen and Vlassenroot, 2010), Christian militia groups in countries including the Central African Republic and Nigeria (BBC, 4/12/2013, Borzello, 2004), extreme right wing groups in South Africa (Welsh, 1995), and ethnic militias and so-called 'civil militias' in West, Central and East Africa (Nyabola, 2009, Okumagba, 2009). Indeed, as Amaliya and Nwankpa's discussion helps to elaborate, there are discussions to be had about the categorisation of groups over time, and the way that contests may be infused with different ideological perspectives and reflect shifting strategic aims (Vidino et al., 2010). It is quite possible that what starts out as an ethnic militia comes to operate more as a religiously defined organization and vice versa. What is also largely absent from this special edition is a discussion of definitions of terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa. Of course, the Terrorism Studies literature as a whole is awash with arguments about definitions of terrorism. However, the Sub-Saharan African context would seem to be an especially interesting one in which to examine and return to basic conceptual issues, grounding them in clearly articulated empirical examples. Why is it, after all, that in a context of multiple insurgencies, only certain insurgent groups are identified as terrorist groups? And at what point can we talk about 'state terrorism', and when, if ever, might it be useful to do so?

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