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Global Counter-terrorism:

Draining the Swamps of 'Homegrown Terrorism'

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The United States has laudably set up a well-funded architecture to counter the threat of international terrorism. But the dominant course of action is military-heavy, thus eclipsing the critical "soft" options such as poverty eradication and education. Washington's handball style is wreaking havoc on fragile democracies. Quieter and more nuanced and pragmatic strategies are needed to effectively deal with Islamism and terrorism.

Islamism split Africa through the middle after 9/11 and leaders played the anti-Islamist and 'terrorism' card to win foreign aid or weaken their political opponents.

On top of Africa's festering insecurity in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on America, the continent has become a veritable theatre of a deadly war between Islamic jihadists and their foes.

Africa is, however, not just a hapless ham in the sandwich of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilisations" between the West and the rest in the re-ordering of global power relations. It is a continent in the eye of the storm of a fast spreading indigenous Islamic fundamentalism intricately linked to global networks of jihadists.

As argued by Alex de Waal in a recent book, *Islamism and its Enemies in the Horn of Africa* (2004), Africa has been an incubator of political Islam and laboratory of radical Islamic ideas and practices. It still is.

In the Eye of the Islamist Storm

Africa lies in the vortex of Islamism for a variety of reasons. Its proximity and historical bonds with the Middle East — the primary focus of Osama bin Laden's declared jihad — has aided the back-and-forth movements of militants.

The continent is also home to more Muslims than the Middle East (over 300 million), with its countries being either Muslim or having vocal Muslim minorities. This has not only exposed the continent to sectarian conflicts and terrorist incursions, but as the chairman of the US Congress sub-committee on Africa, Ed Royce, noted in 2004, Africa has become "the place where our [US] fight against terrorism is being fought."

Moreover, chronic poverty, joblessness and a deep sense of marginalization — accentuated by the negative forces of economic globalization — have collectively enabled Islamic revolutionaries to export their ideas and win allies in poor Muslim enclaves, slums and refugee camps.

Finally, networks of radical Islamists are drawn into Africa by lures of profits from fabulous resources like oil and diamonds in states trapped in cataclysmic conflicts like Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of Congo to finance their jihadist activities.

Broadly, the face-off between political Islam and the West has deeper indigenous roots on the African soil than analysts concede. Chronicles of East Africa's Swahili civilization are replete with examples of local jihadists who, with the help of Islamic fighters from Turkey and the Gulf, pushed back the frontiers of Portugal's Indian Ocean Empire (1498-1699) to modern Mozambique.

But it is recent bouts of terrorism which have turned a sharp spotlight on the threat of Islamic radicalism in Africa:

1993: Suspected Islamic terrorists killed 18 US army rangers in the "Black Hawk Down" episode in Mogadishu, prompting America to pull out its troops from Somalia in March 1994;

August 1998: Suspected al Qaeda agents simultaneously bombed American embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam, killing some 263 people (among them 240 Kenyans, 11 Tanzanians and 12 Americans) and injuring 5,000 Kenyans and 86 Tanzanians;

October 2000: Yemeni terrorists hit the USS Cole just off the East African Indian Ocean seaboard, killing 17 American sailors.

November 2002: Suspected al Qaeda agents bombed the Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel in Mombasa. Within minutes, other agents using shoulder-fired SA-7 missiles narrowly missed an El Al passenger plane taking off from Mombasa Airport;

May 2003: The Islamic organization, Salafiya Jihadiya, reportedly exploded a bomb in Casablanca, Morocco.

These terrorist attacks have given terrorism an indelible Muslim face, with the smoldering Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East continually feeding the embers of fanaticism.

Indigenous African Islamism

Islamic fundamentalism became a powerful force in Africa after Omar el Bashir's National Islamic Front seized power in Khartoum in 1989, making Sudan the new epicentre of the militant Islamist world. In the 1990s, Khartoum's fundamentalists provided sanctuary to a gamut of Islamist fighters from Abu Nidal, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and Gama'at al Islamiyya to Hamas, Hezbollah and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Osama bin Laden took refuge in Sudan in 1991-1996, using his base to weave a global network and to underwrite radical groups in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and other sub-Saharan countries, including thinking up the bombing of American embassies in East Africa.

Aside from providing aid and shelter to insurgents like the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia in Ethiopia, the Eritrean Islamic Jihad and Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), Sudan's Islamic zealots also covertly aided Gama'at al-Islamiyya's abortive attempt on President Hosni Mubarak's life in July 1995.

Sure enough, Sudan paid a heavy price for its officially-sanctioned extremism, with the UN Security Council imposing sanctions on Khartoum in 1996-2001 and America's cruise missiles attacks on its al-Shifa aspirin factory after the 1998 embassy bombings.

Indigenous African Islamic extremism also had its avant-gardes within Somalia, which is almost 100 per cent Muslim. In the 1980s, the al-Ittihad al Islamiya (or Somali Islamic Union/SIU) emerged as the flag-bearer of radicalism.

Al-Ittihad's political influence grew meteorically after the ouster of Siyad Barre in late January 1991, stoking up international fears of Somalia becoming a recruiting or training site for al Qaeda.

Somalia, however, never became a sanctuary for al Qaeda fighters driven out of Afghanistan by the US and its allies after 9/11. But al-Ittihad provided a safe passage for al Qaeda agents to Kenya, including Ali Mohamed (a key figure in planning the 1998 and 2002 bombings), Suleiman Abdullah, Wadih el-Hage (who set up al Qaeda's Kenyan cell) and Fuzul Abdullah Mohamed, a Comorian national who became the cell's commander.

Al-Ittihad also infiltrated Somali refugee camps in Dadaab, northern Kenya, recruiting and training fighters to prepare them to "defend Islam and the Somali nation."

The victory in June 2006 of the Union of Islamic Courts over the US-backed alliance of warlords signified the growing power of al-Ittihad's hard-liners in Mogadishu. Al-Ittihad's triumph has drawn credible fears of Somalia becoming a version of the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

It has also thrown the future of Somalia's Transitional Federal Government into serious doubt and heightened the risk of a regional proxy war involving Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti alarmed by al-Ittihad's pan-Somali ambitions of a "Greater Somalia."

Islamism split Africa after 9/11

Indigenous Islamism also thrived on the Indian Ocean shoreline, which has emerged as a jihadist beachhead. Islamic resistance to Daniel arap Moi's "big-man-rule" in the 1990s coalesced around the (unregistered) Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) and its fiery leader, Sheikh Khalid Balala, and was occasionally tinged with violence.

Islamism split Africa through the middle after 9/11. Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, witnessed spontaneous public show of support for bin Laden and a dramatic rise in anti-American rhetoric across West Africa.

While the Kenya government condemned the attacks on America and supported the US led Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, its Muslims took to the streets to pressure the government to condemn the "acts of terrorism and aggression against the innocent people of Afghanistan".

The threat of Islamic fundamentalism in Africa has loomed even larger. In Morocco, over 1,000 adherents of Salafiya Jihadiya were arrested in the wake of the bomb-blast in Casablanca on May 16, 2003. Mwai Kibaki's newly elected government in Kenya disclosed in May 2003 that a key al-Qaeda member was plotting an attack on Western interests, confirming the presence of international terrorist cells with local allies. One of its nationals, Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, was alleged to be the leader of al Qaeda's Mombasa network and a mastermind of the 2002 Paradise Hotel attack.

In Tanzania, the formation in the 1980s of the *Baraza Kuu la Waislamu wa Tanzania* [Supreme Council of Tanzania Muslims] ushered in an new era of indigenous Islamism linked to militants in Iran and Sudan. Sheik Ponda Isi Ponda's clandestine group, *Simba wa Mungu* (God's Lion) became the hub of local Islamic militancy, and is believed to have inspired attacks on foreigners and moderate Tanzanians and sparked the violence that marred elections in Zanzibar in 2000 and in October 2005.

Khalfan Khamis Muhammad, one of the al Qaeda operatives convicted in connection with the 1998 US embassy bombings, and Qaed Sanyan al-Harithi, another bin Laden agent killed in Yemen in 2004, were said to have ties with Sheik Ponda. Even more strikingly, Islamists have aided local non- Islamic extremist groups. Sudan's Islamists provided weapons, ammunition, fuel and other essentials to Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda as part of its proxy war against John Garang's Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA).

Similarly, Kenya's outlawed Mungiki sect converted to Islam in September 2000 in what appeared like a strategy to gain access to assistance from the world of Muslim militants, with its leaders speaking of creating a "nation guided by the Sharia." In 2004, Mungiki stridently turned to terrorist tactics to stem the wave of internal defections, including beheading deserters and foes ala Iraqi jihadists.

Charities from the Gulf

Africa has also witnessed the entry of Islamic charities from the Gulf region professing an Islamic identity and advancing an Islamic way of life. Islamic voluntarism has left its imprints in the areas of relief to poor communities during emergencies, funding mosques, religious schools (madrassas), health facilities and sponsoring social programmes for refugee camps in northern Kenya.

But as Sudanese scholar, Mohamed Salih, rightly notes, faced with the difficulties of balancing between global values and the specificity of Islam, some of these Islamic NGOs have become "cronies of militant Muslim groups, including an emergent tide of indigenous African Islamic fundamentalism."

As a result, some of these Islamic NGOs have been accused of using resources to bribe corrupt African elite to turn a blind eye to the spread of militancy and to bankroll the activities of extremists. Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation, the sole Islamic NGO operating in the Dadaab refugee camps, was accused of working in cahoots with al-Ittihad cells in the camps to provide training and political education to Somali refugees along the lines of Pakistan-style madrassa classes.

This partly prompted the Kenya government to ban al-Haramain in 2003 and to deport its Sudanese director, Sheikh Muawiya Hussein. The banning of al-Muntada al-Islami, and aI-Ibrahim Foundation and the closing down of Wakalatul-Rahmah offices and the aI-Najah Islamic Centre in Northern Kenya, however, drew the ire of Kenyan Muslims.

Draining the Swamps

Africa's response to Islamism is framed by the security imperatives of the US-led "war on terror." Individually, African states have strengthened police and intelligence abilities, tightened border controls, coastline surveillance and anti-money laundering measures. Many countries have hastily introduced legislations to curb terrorist incursions and ratified UN counter-terrorism instruments.

But these laws, in the main inspired by America's Patriotic Act, have faired dismally in balancing between countering extremism and safeguarding the values of democracy and human rights. Like a double-edged blade that cuts both ways, countering Islamism and terrorism is catalyzing peace processes in Sudan and Somalia, but also imperiling democracy in weaker states.

From Eritrea to Ethiopia and Uganda, incumbents have played the anti-Islamist and "terrorism" card to win foreign aid or weaken the opposition, thus blurring the line between bona fide terrorism and localized resistance or struggles for power.

"Soft" counter-terrorism

On its part, the US has set up a well-funded counter-terrorist architecture, with its nodal points as the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa in Djibouti (October 2002), the $100 million East Africa Counter-Terrorist Initiative (June 2003), the $129 million Pan-Sahel Initiative, the $200 million West African Initiative and the Southern African Initiative.

Significant steps have been made at the continental level towards curbing extremism. Majority of states ratified the July 1999 Organisation of African Union Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism. In 2004, the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism was also established in Algiers, Algeria, to guide response to Islamism and terrorism. But emboldened by Nelson Mandela, former liberation fighters in Africa have expressed unease with America's blanket definition of terrorism that tends to brand freedoms struggles — past and present — as "terrorism."

But the extant course of action is military-heavy, thus eclipsing the critical "soft" options such as poverty eradication and education. Critics also point to Washington's handball style, which is wreaking havoc on fragile democracies. Quieter and more nuanced and pragmatic strategies are needed to effectively deal with Islamism and terrorism.

All things considered, successfully draining the swamps in which extremism and terrorism has thrived in Africa demands a holistic approach tying together military aspects and the "soft" options of poverty eradication, conflict resolution and peace-building.

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