

TERRORISM AND AFRICA

On the danger of further attacks in sub-Saharan Africa

STEFAN MAIR

Introduction

The attacks in Mombasa of November 2002 drew attention to a region of the world that had been considered a minor stage in the fight against terrorism following September 11, namely sub-Saharan Africa. The alliance against terrorism previously limited its efforts in this area to preventing al-Qaeda fighters from finding refuge in the Horn of Africa. What seemed to have been forgotten was that the first monstrous attacks by al-Qaeda took place in East Africa. In 1998, the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam were bombed, killing 291 and 10 people respectively. The recent actions of al-Qaeda in the region raise two questions: Does Africa threaten to become a hotspot of international terrorism? And, how can terrorist attacks in Africa be prevented in the future?

According to the rash conclusion of some development specialists, poverty is the main cause of terrorism. If this were in fact the case, sub-Saharan Africa would provide ample fertile soil for terrorist cells to take root and spread. That both processes are thus far not discernable, adds credence to the thesis that the causes of terrorism are complex. Terrorism is founded on the interaction of a lack of economic perspectives, social deprivation, a loss of cultural identity, political repression and a dysfunctional state. But these factors alone do not lead inevitably to terrorism. If they

did, Africa would qualify as the hotspot of international terrorism. Instead, rather than being directed outwards, it appears that the potential for violence arising from the interplay of these factors in sub-Saharan Africa is, for the most part, directed inwards against one's own society in the form of increasing violent crime, civil war and plundering warlords.

Clearly (international) terrorism requires two additional factors: a mobilising, unifying idea, such as that offered by Islamic fundamentalism; and appropriate agitators, who abuse this idea in order to organise a powerful terrorist force against a common external enemy.

Islam in sub-Saharan Africa

That raises the question of the spread and strength of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. Experts on Islam differentiate between a number of centres of Islam in the region including the West African Sahel zone, the tropical zone along the Gulf of Guinea, the Sudanese Nile region, Ethiopia, the East African coastal strip, the area inhabited by the Somaal and the Cape region. In all of these regions, the spread of Islam took a different path in which the relative importance of specific elements of the religion depended on the historical and social context.

Nevertheless, the majority of these areas appear to share two common features. Islam did not develop into an exclusive state religion and the interpretation of the Islamic legal code appears to have been moderate across the board. This does not mean that Islam is not a political force in these regions. On the contrary. In West Africa, for example, spiritual leaders and traditional Islamic leaders have played, and continue to play, a central role in exercising political power and maintaining clientele systems. Even the long-standing practice of a moderate interpretation of Islam is subject to change. A radicalisation has taken place with the introduction of *shariah* in several Nigerian states, rigid adherence to *shariah* in Somalia and extremist tendencies among Muslims in South Africa. The reasons for this are in part rather varied. In the case of Nigeria, it appears that aggressive missionary work in the north by Saudi Wahabis has played a decisive role in escalating the conflict between Christians and Muslims, a conflict that flared up again during the Miss World competition last year.

Still, despite all the differences, these processes of radicalisation have one thing in common. Where Muslims are in the minority, they generally belong to the losers of the social and political change that Africa has gone through over the past ten years. That is especially the case in the coastal states of West and East Africa. In West Africa, democratisation has removed Muslim leaders and their followers from the levers of power; in East Africa the social advancement of the Muslim minority has trailed that of the region's already low average.

The partial loss of power for Muslims in West Africa stands in fundamental conflict with claims to power based on tradition. The social conflicts in the coastal states of West Africa are increasingly developing along a north-south divide that is largely congruent with the geographic division between Christians and Muslims. This is particularly noticeable in Nigeria, Ghana and the Côte d'Ivoire.

African terrorism?

Nevertheless, in the short term it is unlikely that extremist Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa will become an important and integral part of al-Qaeda's terrorist network. In contrast to North Africa, membership is likely to be limited to a few individuals. Al-Qaeda's call after the Mombasa attacks on African Muslims to join their cause was met with decidedly more indignation than approval, with two important exceptions. First, the Somalian group al-Ittihad al-Islamya is considered a part of al-Qaeda. It is suspected of carrying out the attacks in Mombasa—even if some observers doubt that this group is still operational. Second, there are extremist elements in South Africa that could develop into terrorist cells.

The possibility, however, of the development of a genuine African variant of terrorism cannot be ruled out entirely. The necessary ingredients—lack of economic perspectives, social deprivation, a loss of cultural identity, political repression and dysfunctional states—are virtually omnipresent in sub-Saharan Africa. All that is needed is a mobilising idea and agitators in order to direct the violence bred by these factors externally. Indications of this sort of process already exist.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) it has become conventional wisdom to interpret the country's miseries as the result of policies of the industrialised countries. They are charged with preventing the development of the country in order to keep the price of raw materials down and using states such as Uganda and Rwanda in order to ensure access to these resources by force. With the attacks in Kenya and Tanzania, the perception that Africa has once again, following the end of the Cold War, become a victim and the theatre of a conflict between external parties, namely the terrorist network of al-Qaeda and the alliance against terrorism, is likely to strengthen the already widespread tendency to believe in conspiracy theories. Africans are increasingly going to wonder if the war on terrorism is 'their' war.

In the next couple of years, the

importance of Africa in terms of international terrorism will focus on two factors. First, the weak and desolate states of Africa provide an excellent space to draw back to and their informal economies offer superb conditions for money laundering and parking capital. Second, ineffective state security apparatuses create a convenient environment for carrying out attacks.

State disintegration and terrorism

Sub-Saharan Africa is home to more failing states than any other region. Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone and the DRC are in the final throes of a process of state disintegration. Guinea, Chad, the Central African Republic, the Republic of Congo, Sudan and Angola are also in the advance stages of this process. But even in more or less functioning states such as Kenya, Tanzania, Mali, Zambia, Cameroon, Malawi and, until recently, Côte d'Ivoire the state is hardly capable of effectively maintaining a monopoly on violence and controlling the entire territory of the country. Border areas and the slums of the big cities are already de facto zones outside the state's control. The security forces' training and equipment are entirely insufficient and corruption and criminalisation of the police is far advanced. The shadow economy of these crumbling states makes capital transactions and trafficking in weapons, raw materials and consumer goods possible, without which terrorist networks would be unable to function. Although rumours that al-Qaeda is profiting from the diamond trade in Sierra Leone and precious gems trafficking in Tanzania have yet to be proven, they are entirely plausible.

Kenya is an excellent example of the consequences of eroding state power. For years the northeast of the country, which borders Somalia, has been essentially cut off from the rest of the state. Safe travel in this part of the country is only possible in militarily protected convoys. The security forces have withdrawn to isolated forts, leaving control of the area to gangs and Somali warlords. In the poverty stricken

areas of Nairobi, power basically rests in the hands of militias run by religious sects and ethnic leaders. Well supplied with weapons from Somalia, they carry out gang robberies. Police officers rent weapons and vehicles to criminal groups and occasionally participate in robberies. Income from criminal activities ensure their physical survival and provide them with the hope of social advancement. Under these conditions, the Kenyan security forces would not have been able to prevent the attacks in Mombasa even if the government had been sufficiently informed of the danger and had taken the situation seriously. The government is currently incapable of controlling the trading of goods and the movement of people across the Somali-Kenyan border even if it were determined to do so.

The incapacity of the majority of African security forces to protect targets threatened by terrorism is in stark contrast with the great variety of such potential targets including embassies, the numerous agencies and projects of international development organisations, subsidiaries of American and European companies and international tourist hotels. The US embassies and offices of the development organisation USAID already resemble 'wild west' forts of the 19th century. Oil and mining companies have resorted to protecting their property with private, paramilitary security services. Americans, Europeans and Africans who can afford to are increasingly withdrawing to heavily guarded and elaborately protected gated communities. Still, barriers cannot be efficiently erected around all threatened establishments. This is especially the case for geographically isolated institutions, which would be too costly to protect. Examples include development projects in remote areas and tourist hotels in national parks.

What is to be done?

How should western industrialised countries respond to these dangers? To a certain extent, the problem will solve itself. As the impression of a general insecurity in Africa grows, which is now strengthened even

further due to the increased danger of terrorist attacks, tourists and corporations are increasingly turning their backs on the region—with the exception of South Africa and along the Gulf of Guinea where oil exploration still attracts considerable investment. This intensifies the existing economic misery in the majority of these countries. Of course, development and African experts react to the growing danger of terrorism almost reflexively by warning that the causes of terrorism must be fought. But even if the international donor community were to devote a great deal more of its resources to economic and social development, fighting poverty and cultural dialogue, it would still be decades before African states obtained a level of development that would make violent solutions to conflicts unlikely. Moreover, wealth does not prevent the creation of terrorist cells, as the example of Saudi Arabia shows.

The problem of a growing terrorist threat in Africa also requires measures that will have an effect in the short term. Among the possibilities could be a reversal of the trend of withdrawing militarily from the region. The US already appears to be moving in this direction. However, the fact that neither the substantial presence of French troops in Djibouti nor the intelligence efforts of the German navy off the coast of Somalia and East Africa were able to prevent the attacks in Mombasa raises doubts about the

appropriateness of this suggestion. And an attempt to combat terrorist cells in Somalia with an intervention of Ethiopian troops had only limited success. Of greater importance for the short-term fight against terrorism in Africa would be state capacity building, in particular in terms of concentrating on the reform and support of the security sector in general and the police in particular.

Conclusion

While sub-Saharan Africa is showing many factors which led to the rise of international terrorism in the Middle East and Central Asia, the emergence of a genuinely African type of international terrorism is rather improbable—at least for the foreseeable future. The main terrorist threat in Africa arises from the incapability of African states to control their territory and to protect potential targets of terrorist assaults. Africa cannot win the fight against terrorism without determined investments in state capacity building, especially in the security sector, by its American and European partners.

Such assistance can, however, be misused for undermining political liberalisation and democratisation in Africa and, by that, could reinforce political factors which contributed to the emergence of international terrorism in other regions. Alertness and a differentiated approach can at least minimise this risk.