

INSECURITY AND COUNTER-INSURGENCY IN AFRICA

Richard Joseph

The Priority

Several years ago, I heard a senior U.S. government official discuss the war in Afghanistan. He described the challenges of the complex nation, and the even greater ones in neighboring Pakistan where large swaths of territory are outside the control of the national government. Americans, he said, should be prepared for military engagement in this multinational arena for 10 to 15 years. It was an eye-opener, not just of the quagmire the United States had rushed into, but the fact that most Americans were unaware of what he stated so convincingly.

If the current trend continues, one day the same may be said about the band of insecurity from northeast to northwest Africa. This region is likely to experience increasing instability and warfare, while narratives of jihadist revolt and terrorist technologies circulate among its citizens. The countries that may be affected, to differing degrees, include: Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Sudan, Congo, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia. Individuals cross these national borders easily, as do ideas, trading goods and armaments. We tend to think of these countries as occupying different geographical and cultural zones, but the reality on the ground is less hermetic.

Armed conflict has occurred in many forms throughout this area as both militaries and irregular forces disregard national borders. In Libya, the Gaddafi regime was involved for decades in seeding revolt in several of these countries, including efforts to dismember Chad. Many Chadians, and other citizens of west and equatorial Africa, were enticed to Libya as labor migrants and became trapped by the uprising against the regime. Conversely, some of Gaddafi's military officers and family members have taken refuge in Niger and when his son, Seif al-Islam el-Gaddafi, was captured in southwest Libya many believed he had fled across the border to Niger. All the countries bordering Sudan have been enmeshed, at one time or another, in its violent conflicts. Ethiopia—while constantly tamping down unrest among its disaffected communities, especially from the largest ethnic group, the Oromo—has been called upon to use its army as a pacification force in Sudan and Somalia. Ugandan soldiers constitute a major component of African Union peacekeepers in Somalia; and the Kenyan invasion of that country in October 2011 added a wholly new dimension to cross-border hostilities. The re-entry of Ethiopian troops and heavy armaments into Somalia a month later raised the stakes greatly considering the negative consequences

of their 2007–2008 occupation of parts of the country. The year ended with horrific Christmas day bombing attacks in Nigeria by Boko Haram, which lifted the 2011 death toll attributed to this jihadist group to almost 500.

What the people of countries in this band have in common is poverty as all are poorer than their southern neighbors. Some of them, such as Mali and Niger, have vast areas with minimal governmental presence. As a consequence, they have become recruiting grounds and havens for al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). With the exception of Mali, which has experienced two decades of democratic progress, the governments range from autocratic Eritrea—whose repressive government has forced many of its citizens to flee—to contentious democracies like Nigeria and Kenya. While France is intermittently drawn into counter-insurgency, especially when its citizens are kidnapped by insurgent groups, it is the United States that is most steadily involved in such operations. As the United States has withdrawn militarily from Iraq, gradually draws down its forces in Afghanistan, and adjusts to an altered political landscape in the Middle East, resources will be strained to respond to African insecurities and insurgencies.

Why is It Important and What Needs to Happen in 2012?

There is a need for urgent instability and warfare policy reviews in three theaters where the challenges are acute. First, after two decades, the implosion of Somalia as a nation, the brutalities of Al-Shabaab, and the depredations of Somali pirates must be recognized for what they are: severe threats to international peace and security. After enormous sums have been expended to install a transitional government in Mogadishu, and bribe—and thus finance—piracy, an international conference should be convened under U.N. auspices to consider one central question: Can legitimate governance be restored to the entire territory of Somalia and, if so, how? In addition to self-governing Somaliland and Puntland, many statelets are emerging. The absence of a single national state and multifaceted warfare exacerbated the 2011 drought and famine. Several authors have suggested the need to resurrect the U.N. trusteeship system to manage countries in which no sovereign authority exists and where the people experience extreme suffering. Whatever the specific outcomes, a comprehensive global

effort involving all necessary military, diplomatic and humanitarian actions should be undertaken to end the lawlessness in what *used to be* the nation of Somalia. It is not just the security of the Somali people and those of the region that has been undermined, but also world security, due to the crime and warfare in this largely ungoverned territory with an extensive sea coast.

Second, although Sudan's leader, Omar al-Bashir, has been indicted by the International Criminal Court, his regime continues to be accused of conducting war crimes. The international community has engaged the Bashir regime to secure South Sudan independence. But South Sudan is faced with perpetual war on its northern borders, subversion within from Khartoum proxies, and the entrenchment in Juba of an autocratic regime based on oil income, global aid, and a post-liberation army. Sudan, even with the loss of the south, is not likely to become a coherent nation in which its peripheral areas are controlled with anything but force and Janjaweed-like militarism. As with the transformations in Egypt and Libya to its north, the 22-year Bashir regime will eventually run its course. Will it be succeeded by a regime capable of governing this entity through non-belligerent statecraft? When all is considered, Sudan should either become a confederal state or, like Yugoslavia, dissolve into viable sovereign entities. Pathways to these alternative outcomes, however, are not apparent. Consequently, no end is in sight to a half-century of near-incessant warfare with staggering levels of human suffering.

The third major priority area for sustained international engagement should be northern Nigeria. There are few African nations with which the U.S. and other major countries should engage with more today—despite the known difficulties. If Nigeria, with one-fifth the population of Sub-Saharan Africa, becomes “Pakistanized” with the entrenchment of militant groups that benefit from illicit relations with rogue operators in and outside government, the dire consequences for this nation and its neighbors are incalculable. It has taken over a decade to achieve a tenuous calm in Nigeria's delta region where armed militias once flourished. That conflict, despite the great losses inflicted in lives and petroleum production, remained largely localized. Islamic militancy in northern Nigeria, however, has deeper roots, covers a greater land area, targets a population larger than that of any other African country except Egypt and Ethiopia,

and can draw inspiration and material support from global jihadism. Terrorist attacks by Boko Haram, the self-declared affiliate of al-Qaida, have increased in frequency and lethality. The August 26, 2011 suicide attack that destroyed the U.N. headquarters in the capital, Abuja, killing 25 persons, and several bombing incidents on Christmas Day that resulted in even more deaths, convey the huge challenges now posed by Islamic extremism in Nigeria.

While urgent efforts are being made to improve the counter-terrorist capacities of Nigeria's security forces, and similar initiatives pursued in this band of insecurity, it is important to develop a more comprehensive response. The Obama administration announced in October 2011 the dispatch of 100 armed military advisers to help catch Joseph Kony, head of the murderous Lord Resistance Army that once terrorized Uganda. Someday, there could be many drone aircraft scrutinizing countries beyond Somalia, counterinsurgency units operating—covertly and overtly—on the ground, and more cross-border military incursions. Such a scenario would indicate the extensive radicalization that had taken place and the degree to which expansion of terrorist cells had occurred. To keep this from becoming a reality, a broader global response is now needed, involving national governments and continental, regional and non-governmental agencies. Of particular importance is the need for increased research by policy scholars on the interwoven economic, political and security dimensions and their active engagement with policymakers. Finally, unless innovative approaches are pursued regarding these three priority challenges—criminality and statelessness in Somalia, a Khartoum regime that continues to rely on unrestrained force, and deep economic distress in northern Nigeria—any hope of avoiding more insecurity and insurgencies in this band of Africa would remain elusive.