HOW THE WEST CAN DO MORE MILITARILY IN AFRICA

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THE PRIORITY

In 2015, new and precarious security challenges face the African continent: Elections loom in Nigeria as well as in at least 10 other African countries, raising prospects of electoral violence, while internal political fights in Libya, among others, rage on. Violent extremism has also become a persistent threat, from the tragic attacks in 2013 on Nairobi's Westgate Mall and multiple assaults on Kenya's coastal region by al-Shabab, to the kidnap of over 200 Chibok schoolgirls and slew of bombings in Nigeria by Boko Haram throughout 2014.

These instances of violence undermine the region's dramatic economic growth, slow or even halt investment, jeopardize the welfare of its citizens, contribute to famine, create regional instability, and destabilize governments and public institutions. They also threaten Western interests by fostering instability that enables the spread of extremism, with the "underwear bomber" of Nigerian origin in 2009 serving as an early warning sign of what could emerge from the region. Yet extremist violence is only one dynamic among the multitude of factors influencing the security landscape of the continent. Recent highlights and trends in violent conflict in Africa, beyond the headlines noted above, include the following:

- A serious civil war in the Central African Republic fought largely along Muslim-Christian lines led to the deployment of first an African Union force and now a United Nations force, with a modest calming of a situation that nonetheless still remains quite fraught.

- Violence between and within the two Sudans remains serious and incendiary, though perhaps somewhat less intense as 2014 concludes than at many other points in the last decade.

- Somalia is trending favorably, with ongoing and generally successful counter offensives by the African Union (largely made up of Ugandan, Kenyan, Ethiopian and Burundian troops) against al-Shabab in recent months, though spillover effects into Kenya in particular remain very worrisome.

- The swath of land in northwestern Africa running from Libya through Mali to Nigeria and now Cameroon remains unstable and linked by overlapping rebel movements, with Mali doing somewhat better but Libya increasingly threatened.

- The conflict in the Congo has largely stalemated, with a stronger position for government and United Nations forces than in past years in the country's troubled east, but the area is still a far cry from stable.

While Africa is clearly faced by many and diverse violent conflicts, it is making some key improvements. In fact, reflecting on the developments in 2014, it is clear that the challenges for 2015 are not necessarily in responding to cataclysmic situations, but in building on its recent peacekeeping progress—for example, in Somalia, where AU forces have cleared al-Shabab insurgents from Mogadishu and other strategic areas. With the development and strengthening of African Union forces, especially the full implementation of the AU's African Standby Force (ASF) in 2015, the AU will be capable of targeting acute threats in specific places, precluding an escalation to more serious and widespread forms of conflict. Peacebuilding interventions by regional organizations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in South Sudan also hold promise for more African solutions to African problems, often legitimizing interventions and making resolutions more acceptable to the parties involved.

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WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

As noted above, extremism is just one factor contributing to some of the myriad of violent conflicts on the continent. Many conflicts in Africa have stemmed from longstanding issues of political, economic and social marginalization as well as systemic inequalities and historical grievances between identity groups. In addition, weak institutions fail to protect individuals and preserve the rule of law while widespread poverty leaves many citizens without hope and feeling they have little resort but violence. Increasingly, we are seeing dictators attempting to manipulate political systems to extend their stays in power, inflaming tensions with desperate citizens whose uprisings could turn violent, as seen in Burkina Faso in October 2014.

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Thus, the common Western belief that what is most important in Africa is the threat from extremist groups like Boko Haram, al-Shabab, and the militias and terrorists that have plagued Mali and nearby countries simplifies complex relationships and conflicts into "good guys" versus "bad guys." In doing so, it obscures the dynamics of the conflicts—the diverse stakeholders and their varying motives for perpetuating violence—as well as potential entry points for military and diplomatic intervention. We clearly cannot view the issue of violence in Africa solely through the lens of transnational violent extremism, especially from what might be termed "al-Qaida'ism": Salafist or takfiri movements claiming Islam as their ideology but in fact perverting and wrongly impugning that great religion.

We must look beyond the headlines and engage Africans in the way they tend to view the issue of violence. Thus, one must broaden the aperture beyond that of the so-called global jihad, and, indeed, even beyond civil and regional conflict to the subject of crime and organized violence.

Taking a broader perspective is not only the more diplomatic approach, but also the more promising way to build cooperative relationships with African states that define their security threats much more broadly than Westerners may appreciate.

Many good things are happening in Africa. Civil warfare on balance is down from levels of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, with estimated annual death rates half or less of what they once were (Cilliers 2014; Human Security Report Project 2013). Democracy is spreading, as are strong economic trends, with about half the continent's nations enjoying favorable developments in both democratic governance and economic growth.

Africans are also taking charge of their own security much more than ever before. The positive developments in Somalia are a case in point. The African Union has committed itself to creating an African Standby Military Force in 2015 to more rapidly address conflict situations and reduce immediate reliance on external actors, such as the United States and France. And the United States may be modestly upgrading its own engagement with the continent through capacity building programs for African militaries and civilian security forces—such as the African Peacekeeping Rapid Response Partnership (A-Prep) and Security Governance Initiative (SGI) programs which were promised by the Obama administration at the 2014 U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE IN 2015

In light of these developments, African governments and organizations should prioritize the following in their 2015 security agenda:

- A fully operational African Standby Force that would enable the AU to respond to localized crises that might balloon into more serious conflicts or are perpetuating existing conflicts.

In addition we also would propose three main lines of effort for the United States and like-minded states in 2015:

- Building on President Obama's acknowledgement that the Libya effort has not turned out well, a much more intensive international effort to help train and outfit a national police force and a national army should be enacted.

- The U.S. and others should create sustained, high-level engagement with Nigeria's various political actors so that the dynamics leading up to the 2015 election do not worsen regional and sectarian schisms that may provide some of the disaffection among many citizens that Boko Haram can then exploit. American military and intelligence support for the Nigerian state should increase in targeted areas, too. (For more on the upcoming Nigerian elections, see **"The 2015 Presidential Elections in Nigeria: The Issues and Challenges."**)

- With U.S. forces downsizing dramatically in Afghanistan (even if increasing their role modestly in Iraq and Syria), the United States could consider sending what is now known as a Security Force Assistance Brigade to the Congo to undergird the U.N. effort there and begin the process of making the Congolese armed forces truly capable of handling more of the nation's internal security challenges than they are now able to muster.

With some targeted and generally modest investments, the United States and other key nations can help African states build on what is, in reality, a more promising security environment than many appreciate, with numerous hopeful signs. Building on partial success is often easier than rescuing a completely failed effort from disaster, so we should remember what is going well on the continent and not just which violent extremist acts grab the international headlines.

References

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