How to Counter Violent Extremists in Trans-Saharan Africa

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Brief Analysis

Fueled by the influx of weapons and fighters from Libya, the threat from extremists in Mali and other countries is increasing rapidly, underlining the need for a better-integrated U.S. and allied response.

In the wake of the Arab uprisings that have swept the region since 2011, terrorist and violent extremist organizations in Trans-Saharan Africa have emerged stronger, better armed, and emboldened to pursue wider goals that increasingly threaten U.S. interests. Al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups have redoubled their efforts to exploit gaping security voids, ubiquitous weapons, and endemic corruption, allowing them to traffic illicit goods and viral ideology unchecked across vast, unsecured borders. The resulting instability provides launching points for attacks on U.S. interests in the region and beyond. No country exemplifies the complexity of these problems -- as well as U.S. and international efforts to resolve them -- better than Mali.

CAUTIONARY TALE IN MALI

Long considered a democratic beacon in the Sahel (at least in comparison to its neighbors), Mali now suffers from most of the ills listed above. Despite decades of foreign aid well into the billions of dollars, the country remains near the bottom of the UN's Human Poverty Index. In addition, a long-simmering insurrection by the seminomadic Tuareg minority in the north has paradoxically resulted from and hampered development there. The fighting has also kept the United States from providing consistent security assistance due to the State Department's policy of not intervening in that type of internal dispute.

In 2012, fueled by the chaotic aftermath of a military coup in the capital, Bamako, and the influx of weapons and experienced fighters from Libya, a loose alliance of terrorist groups joined Tuareg separatists to push Malian government forces out of the Texas-sized northern half of the country. The international community failed to predict these events and was slow to react, resulting in hundreds of thousands of displaced persons and staggering humanitarian challenges. In the ensuing blame-a-thon, the United States did not fare well.

In particular, critics pointed to failures in Washington's "whole-of-government" approach to development and security capacity building. Despite almost a decade of U.S. counterterrorism and security assistance, Malian government forces were essentially powerless against a ragtag insurgency. A French-led international force was eventually able to push the extremists back early this year, and the country chose a new president through internationally acclaimed democratic elections in August. Yet as Romano Prodi, the UN special envoy for the Sahel, warned in September, "The level of fragility is still high in the region, and international focus is beginning to wane."

Today, northern Mali remains on edge, with roadside bombs, suicide attacks, and banditry occurring with alarming frequency even though the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) assumed responsibility for security in July. Bamako has made some efforts to counter extremist and criminal activities by improving governance and aid delivery. Yet progress has been hampered by corruption and mismanagement within the Malian government as well as disorganized engagement by the United States and other foreign partners.

In recent weeks, more ominous developments unfolded as the Tuareg rebel group MNLA (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad) announced a unilateral suspension of the regionally brokered peace accord with Bamako. This came just one month after Mauritania's Nouakchott News Agency reported that two violent extremist groups in the Sahara had merged to form a new jihadist organization known as the al-Murabitun Brigade, whose goal is to unify Muslims "from the Nile to the Atlantic under a Salafist flag."

While not entirely surprising, these developments are nonetheless cause for concern well beyond Mali's loose borders. They mark setbacks for the democratically elected government's efforts to reach out to disaffected northern Malians. They also add to the growing body of evidence that violent extremism is spreading southward from the Maghreb to the Sahara, with al-Qaeda-affiliated groups and criminal elements building alliances across the region.

CURE OR TOXIN?

Earlier this year, in a laudable but still-nascent effort to provide a more enduring framework for international assistance to the region, the UN published its "Integrated Strategy for the Sahel," aimed at improving "peace, security, and governance." The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and African Union have also held recent conferences focused on similar themes. And last month**,** Samantha Power, the U.S. permanent representative to the UN, met with various national leaders on the margins of the General Assembly to discuss the more than $700 million Washington has sent to the region in recent years.

In addition to humanitarian and development aid to Saharan partners, the United States funds a multiyear assistance program known as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), a State Department-led family of initiatives aimed at countering violent extremist ideology and building regional security capacity. Since its inception in 2005, TSCTP has sought to complement other U.S. and African programs through a range of diplomacy, development, and security-related packages, some of which have been successes in their own right (e.g., multinational military exercises, counterextremism information operations, and humanitarian medical assistance). Unfortunately, interagency collaboration has not been as healthy as originally envisioned. This January, the *Guardian* described "American efforts to counter the growing Islamist challenge" as "unsuccessful and at times shambolic."

Such comments bring to mind a Government Accountability Office report on TSCTP submitted to the House Foreign Affairs Committee in 2008. That report criticized the government's failure to form a comprehensive, integrated TSCTP plan, noting that "measurement of progress toward TSCTP goals has been limited." Perhaps more problematic was the criticism of departmental parochialism and bickering. The report pointed to the inability of the Defense and State Departments to agree on basic lines of authority and responsibility, indicating that such disagreement "has hampered some TSCTP activities."

POLICY PRESCRIPTIONS

Next week, Washington will hold its annual TSCTP conference, bringing together key players from the State, Defense, and Treasury Departments, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and other agencies to coordinate the partnership's disparate initiatives. In past years, however, the conference has often failed to produce concrete results, serving largely as a discussion and coordination forum with limited strategic-level collaboration or direction.

To reinforce the limited positive momentum in Mali and the Sahara, Washington should ensure that its programs complement one another, with clear division of labor and lines of authority. That seems unlikely unless President Obama assigns a special envoy to the Sahara with the authority to mediate interagency disagreements and oversee development of an updated and integrated TSCTP-like strategy.

Another way to improve the prospects for success is to ensure that U.S. programs complement and coordinate with international and regional programs. No solutions will be found without UN, African Union, and French support. Algiers is a particularly key actor -- despite remaining stubbornly aloof for years, the Algerian government is central to countering the threat posed by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and has arguably the most capable and experienced military west of Egypt. With its participation, a new regional security cooperation strategy would have a better chance of success. Finally, U.S. efforts to improve security and governance are more likely to prosper if those objectives are integrally linked, since both are necessary foundations for stability.

An African proverb advises, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." In setting a new path, Washington should heed that wisdom and keep its focus beyond the horizon.

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