

# Terrorism in West Africa, Post 9/11

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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The following is a rapporteur's summary of Matthew Levitt's remarks to the CNA Corporation's Center for Strategic Studies workshop on "Oil, Terrorism, and More: The Growing Strategic Significance of West Africa."

As we succeed in denying terrorists safe havens in Afghanistan in elsewhere, international Jihadist networks seek new locations in which to establish themselves. Unfortunately West Africa has what it takes to become a terrorist breeding ground: it is resource rich and democracy poor, protection is lacking for civil society and human rights, regional, ethnic and religious conflicts abound as does economic distress, lawlessness and criminal activity. Corruption is rife. In the cities of West Africa, rapidly growing populations of young, unemployed or underemployed young men are easy targets for those who seek to turn resentment and despair to their own purposes.

In Southeast Asia, al-Qaeda operatives successfully fanned local tribal and religious antagonisms into major conflicts and sent scores of recruits to training camps in Afghanistan. This is the type of activity we need to worry about in West Africa today. Patterns we saw develop in East Africa as preludes to the bombing of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam and the attacks on Israelis are showing up now in West Africa: the use of territory in failed states as sanctuary; money laundering through trade in weapons, conflict diamonds and other precious commodities; use of ancient trade routes to move people and contraband across vast, sparsely populated areas.

Lebanese Hezbollah has been present in West Africa for years drawing support from the significant Lebanese commercial community. Donations from Lebanese in West Africa are a major source of funding for Hezbollah's terrorist activities. In December 2003 a UTA flight bound for Beirut crashed on takeoff from Benin killing, among other passengers, the senior Hezbollah official resident in Africa and two of his aides. Reportedly they were transporting \$2 million in cash. According to Israeli and U.S. intelligence Hezbollah raises hundreds of millions of dollars a year in Africa. Many of the same tactics and networks developed by Hezbollah are now being used by al-Qaeda.

What we see now in West Africa is primarily logistical and support activity for radical Islamists. But as we learned in 9/11 we can no longer make distinctions between operations and simple logistic and financial support activity. All of these networks ultimately have an operational component. We must also set aside the idea that Sunnis would never operate with Shi'ia, or that Hezbollah would never operate with al-Qaeda. Cooperation is frequently ad hoc, among individuals. Ibrahim Ba, a Senegalese, is a good example of the fluid relationships that define international terrorism today: an affiliate of former Liberian President Charles Taylor and an RUF commander, Ba had earlier been a Gadhafi bodyguard. In the 1980s he trained in Libya and Afghanistan and fought with Hezbollah in the Bekka Valley. He

remains an essential player in the conflict diamond networks.

North Africa, long considered of minimal interest by American strategists, is now rightly seen as a haven for radical Islamists. In 2003 following terrorist attacks on European and Jewish targets in Casablanca, the Moroccans arrested 700 suspects linked to al-Qaeda. Algerian forces battle al-Qaeda linked Salafist insurgents who operate in the southern desert crossing at will into Mali, Niger and Mauritania. Two of the most prominent al Qaeda figures, one believed to be in Iran and another in Guantanamo, are Mauritanian. In May 2003 Mauritanian officials arrested a total of 36 people associated with a Saudi funded school and a Saudi Islamic Institute and charged them with plotting against the state. Five more suspects thought to be aligned with the Taliban were arrested in Mauritania in February 2004. To protect drivers in the 2004 Paris/Dakar auto race, Mauritania deployed 5,000 soldiers or one third of its national army, to patrol the route.

If you are a terrorist looking for an inviting environment--look no further. West Africa can provide recruits, resources and territories over which governments have little control. [I take] great comfort from the fact that EUCOM believes we must pay more attention to this theater. ❖

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