

Review - Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Africa

Written by Stephen A. Emerson

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STEPHEN A. EMERSON, FEB 18 2016

Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Africa: Fighting Insurgency from Al Shabaab, Ansar Dine and Boko Haram
By Hussein Solomon
Palgrave Macmillan, 2015

Another book about terrorism! Writing about terrorism and counter-terrorism has indeed become a growth industry these days with a steady stream of new titles seemingly being released daily. And the number of so-called “terrorism experts” has expanded exponentially too, although most of these journeymen rarely have anything new to say or offer constructive insights as how best to deal with one of the most pressing security challenges of our day. In particular, the challenge in Africa with its vulnerabilities and facilitating environment has increasingly come to the fore in fueling much of this recent literary avalanche.

Enter Professor Hussein Solomon, a well-established African security scholar (and in the interest of full disclosure a long-time friend and colleague of mine), who along with other respected Africanists, such as Jakkie Cilliers, Martin Ewi and Kwesi Aning, David Francis, and George Klay Kieh, seeks to dissect and analyze the complex phenomenon that is African terrorism and thereby provide practical policy guidance for the way forward. In his current book, Solomon seeks to meld the broad theoretical parameters of critical terrorism studies (CTS) with strategic/military insights from more traditional counter-terrorism approaches “to provide a more holistic approach to counter-terrorism” (p. 19) and an effective plan of action. It is through this lens that Solomon goes on to examine the roots of terrorist insurgencies in Somalia, Mali and Nigeria and critique current efforts to counter them.

At the heart of Solomon’s case analysis is his focus on a combination of separatist nationalism, religion, and identity as critical independent factors in driving the evolution and expansion of the Al Shabaab, Ansar Dine and Boko Haram insurgencies. And in doing so, he illustrates the complexity and interconnectivity of a cross-section of political, social and economic challenges by asking questions like:

Can one refer to the Islamists of Al Shabaab without reference to the Rahanweyn clan, which makes up 70 per cent of their membership? Can one refer to Boko Haram without [addressing] their ethnocentric Hausa-Fulani nationalism? Can one refer to the Islamists of Ansar Dine without reference to their Tuareg identity? In each case the answer is a decisive ‘no’ (p. 19).

This book also addresses the state’s response to each of these case studies and how it has actually facilitated the growth of terrorism in each instance. State failure, divisive institutional structures and policies, and endemic corruption have done as much—if not more—to push politically and economically disenfranchised elements of society into the welcoming arms of these organisations as their own recruiting efforts have done. Likewise, ill-advised or poorly implemented government counter-terrorism programs that rely extensively on the military or heavy-handed, repressive tactics only seem to exacerbate the problem of alienation; the Nigerian government’s initial reaction to the rise of Boko Haram being a case in point.

The latter half of the book contains a useful critique of current African Union (AU) and U.S. counter-terrorism strategies, which Solomon believes too often seek to treat the symptoms of terrorism at the expense of addressing the root causes driving the problem. Of Solomon’s six reasons for the failure of the AU’s current counter-terrorism

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strategy, his highlighting of the reliance on the state system is most telling, as it is “the primary instrument to combat terrorism...[it] is also the Achilles heel of any counter-terrorism efforts. Weak states result in a weak union of states (p. 111).” And, thus by extension we have the creation of ineffectual programs and mechanisms, because the state itself is a large part of the problem. This fundamental flaw is also mimicked in U.S. counter-terrorism engagement, where the central point of engagement is the state and on strengthening militaries in particular. Solomon sees American “ignorance” (of local cultures, of the nature of the state in Africa, of African history and its militaries) as the reason behind U.S. counter-terrorism failings (p. 121).

I would take issue here with Solomon’s use of the word “ignorance,” although his underlying point that current American counter-terrorism engagement is too state and military centric is undeniable true. Washington, however, certainly is not lacking knowledge or an appreciation of African realities as I can attest as one who spent many years enlightening senior U.S. officials and policymakers about them. What it does lack is the political will (often domestically constrained) to implement a holistic, all-of-government counter-terrorism strategy; one that truly utilizes all instruments of American power. After all, U.S. Africa Command was envisioned as “a different kind of military command” built around an integrated diplomatic, development, and defense approach to African engagement. Its implementation, however, has been deeply flawed. Expediency and the need to show immediate results have left the United States with a military centric counter-terrorism strategy that everyone knows will not produce the desired long-term solutions. Washington knows what it needs to do—it just needs to show the intestinal fortitude to do it.

The book does have some shortcomings. Its short length (138 pages of main text) limits Solomon’s full development of several of his ideas, including his theoretical framework integrating traditional and CTS approaches, a more in-depth discussion of domestic vs. international terrorism with respect to the future of African terrorism trends, and expanded explanations of his proposed solutions. And although a case study of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb was missing because it did not meet Solomon’s selection criteria, its absence is sorely noted (as is a detailed look at the Islamic State in Africa, whose rise and growth took place after Solomon’s research cut off). The powerful influence of both these groups on the insurgencies in Somalia, Mali and Nigeria recently cannot be denied and is certainly one of the central issues surrounding the future of African terrorism that needs to be addressed by scholars.

Ultimately, Solomon accomplishes what he set out to do by laying out a useful theoretical framework for exploring the evolving nature of domestic terrorism and the challenges it poses to African governments and by providing critical assessments of AU and American counter-terrorism approaches along with concrete proposals for improving their effectiveness.

About the author:

Dr. Stephen Emerson has spent more than 30 years working on African issues with the U.S. government and in academia. He is a southern Africa regional specialist, where he has lived and worked for many years, but has traveled widely across other parts of the continent too. His areas of professional research and interests include the nature of African terrorism, conflict and the politics of identity, the challenge of transnational and non-traditional threats, and war and conflict resolution. He is the author of dozens of classified and non-classified publications, including his comprehensive military history of the Frelimo-Renamo conflict *The Battle for Mozambique* (2014, Helion & Company). Dr. Emerson served as a political-military analyst with the U.S. Department of Defense, Security Studies Chair at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, and headed the Africa regional studies program at the U.S. Naval War College. Dr. Emerson holds a doctorate in International Relations/Comparative Politics from the University of Florida.