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The African Union and Counter-Terrorism

Africa has witnessed a tremendous increase in terrorist incidents. According to the [Mo Ibrahim Foundation,](#) there has been more than a 1000 percent increase in terrorism since 2006. Moreover, an alarming twenty-two African countries has been targeted by terrorism. This, in turn, raises the question of what the African Union (AU) has done to curb the posed threat. Legislatively, the AU appears quite strong, if one considers the [Algiers Convention](#) on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism of July 1999, the adoption of the Common Defence and Security Policy and the establishment of the [African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism](#) in July 2002. The adoption of the AU [Plan of Action](#) on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism on 14 September 2002 was another facet of the continental body's growing counter-terrorism regime. The enactment of legislative frameworks, however, does not necessarily translate into successful counter-terror strategies on the ground as the alarming increase of terrorist incidents would attest to.

Several reasons account for the [failures of the AU](#) to prosecute a successful counter-terrorism strategy. First, amongst some Heads of State there is a lack of political will to recognize the seriousness of the terrorist threat posed and that it is not merely directed at the West, but at all secular, non-Islamist regimes as an examination of Islamist ideology would reveal. Another reason for the lack of political will is the fact that many African leaders remain more focused on domestic threats that might unseat them as opposed to international terrorism. One indication of this lack of political will is that despite the fact that Member States are legally obliged to report to the Chairperson of the AU on their implementation of continental and international counter-terrorism regimes, many do not and cite `report fatigue' as the reason.

Second, the effectiveness of international organizations is intimately related to the extent of sovereignty or power its constituent elements is willing to yield to them. There exists clearly discernible tensions between the `national interests' of 55 independent African states and the collective interests of Africa's 1.2 billion citizens as represented by the AU. Despite the fact that most African countries acknowledge the transnational nature of the terrorism threat posed, they are reluctant to share their sovereignty with the continental body. The fact that the AU's Secretariat in Addis Ababa has been given no mandate to enforce decisions adopted by the AU, serves as one such example as well as Member States' refusal to cooperate in establishing a regional or continental arrest warrant, which would allow the AU to investigate, arrest and detain terror suspects.

Third, the AU faces the perennial problem of a financial deficit. The deleterious impact of these financial constraints are wide and was evident in West Africa when the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) did not have the strategic airlift capability to wrest northern Mali from the

Islamists in 2012, prompting the French intervention at the request of the government in Bamako. Given this situation, it is particularly surprising that whilst the AU's Constitutive Act sets out ambitious objectives, it lacks an explicit provision for financing the AU. There are ongoing attempts at the moment to rectify this issue.

Fourth, there is the growing criminalization of the African state and the fact that terrorists are exploiting this to expand their influence into state structures. Former Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan, noted that Boko Haram sympathizers are located within the executive and legislative arms of government, in the judiciary, as well as in the armed forces, police and other security agencies. In Somalia, meanwhile, arms meant for the Somali National Army miraculously found their way into the hands of Al Shabaab fighters. The problem with the AU is the implicit assumption that the good state is taking the fight to the bad terrorists and with a bit of help (training, assistance with legislative frameworks, etc.) it can win this fight. Sadly, this is not the case.

The foregoing also raises the question as to why would countries share information with other countries, if those countries' security services are divulging the information. In other words, it is one thing to foster regional and continental counter-terror regimes through the adoption of various plans and conventions, as the AU has been attempting, it is quite another thing for such co-operation to take place in this context.

Going forward, the AU and its Member States need to demonstrate the requisite political will to fight terrorism. Second, given the local grievances driving the likes of Al Shabaab and Boko Haram, a holistic approach to counter-terrorism needs to be adopted which stresses inclusive economic development and good governance. Where the military is deployed, the emphasis should be on highly mobile 600 troop battalions as opposed to bigger brigades of 3,000 troops or a corps of 10,000 troops. In this way counter-insurgency operations can be more effective. Third, for an effective African peace and security architecture to work, the AU's capacity will need to be built from the bottom up, starting with the states themselves. Given the transnational nature of the terrorism threat faced by African governments, sovereignty needs to be pooled. To put it differently, African states have to cede more sovereignty to the AU to ensure their own national security. Finally, a truly effective African counter-terrorism strategy will have to go beyond political elites and embrace civil society, and especially the growing numbers of African Muslims who have grown disenchanted with the political Islam project of Islamists.

Suggested further reading:

Bjorn Moller, "The African Union as Security Actor: African Solutions to African Problems?", Crisis States: Working Paper No. 2. Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economic and Political Science. August 2009, London.

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

Martin Ewi and Kwesi Aning, "Assessing the Role of the African Union in Preventing and Combating Terrorism in Africa," African Security Review, 15(3), 2006.

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