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Intervention through Counterterrorism The Challenges of the Trans-Sahara

Lieutenant Colonel Michael E. Conley
United States Air Force

All that we have to do is to send two mujahidin to the furthest point east to raise a piece of cloth on which is written al-Qaida, in order to make the [U.S.] generals race there...

Usama Bin Ladin, 2004¹

In the spring of 1997, Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky suggested “the United States intervenes often in the conflicts of others, but without a consistent rationale, without a clear sense of how to advance U.S. interests, and sometimes with unintended and expensive consequences.”² Almost two decades have passed since this assertion, but it is not difficult to imagine it being penned last year, or even last week. The U.S. Government (USG) choice to engage in complex security issues of other countries can often seem inconsistent, expensive, and seemingly without end. Within the context of America’s increasingly global emphasis on counterterrorism (CT), perhaps no region of the world highlights the ambiguity and difficulties with the U.S. approach to security concerns better than Africa, more specifically, the Trans-Sahara area.

Created in 2005 and led by the U.S. Department of State (DOS), the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) is designed to counter regional terrorism by using a whole-of-government approach to bolster security, promote democratic governance and build bilateral

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relationships.³ Disappointingly, after more than eight years of commitment in the area through the TSCTP, and the establishment of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007 to address a broad range of security challenges in Africa, real and sustainable progress remains elusive.⁴ In some Trans-Saharan countries, like Mali, the security situation is actually worse now than before the U.S. intervened. Extensive under-governance, over-reliance on CT operations, and gross lack of resources significantly marginalize the current USG strategy in the Trans-Sahara region. This being the case; it is time for the USG to re-assess its strategy for, and interests in, Trans-Saharan security, or it risks diminishing its credibility and squandering shrinking resources, in return for only short-term and marginal security improvements.

A Regional Snapshot

Like many of the diverse and complex aspects of Africa, something as seemingly simple as defining the various regions of the continent can be both ambiguous and overlapping. For example, depending on the context countries in the Trans-Sahara are also identified in other regional groupings such as the Pan-Sahel, Western Africa, North Africa, and the Maghreb. From a USG stance, the TSCTP identifies Mauritania, Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal as the Trans-Saharan countries of interest, with Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia identified as key regional facilitators.⁵

Even though the TSCTP is a DOS led initiative the respective countries are divided between two separate regional bureaus for all other USG diplomatic affairs. While most of the countries fall within the scope of the Bureau of African Affairs, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia are under the purview of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs.⁶ Further complicating the USG position, President Obama's comprehensive *U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa*, released in June 2012, treats Africa as if it is a single entity and fails to identify what specific countries are linked with these USG national interests.⁷

One could argue that the differing regional nomenclature and overlapping sub-groupings are purely academic issues. However, when put into the broader view of regional security, counterterrorism, cross-border conflicts, smuggling routes, tribal/clan alliances, and religion, it is impossible to consider one country without considering each bordering country and its own distinct challenges. For instance, Libya, which lies to the north, is not discussed in any of the previously mentioned groupings. But, its internal revolution and subsequent instability have resulted in the movement of destabilizing forces such as illegal arms, Al Qaeda operatives and experienced foreign fighters through the ungoverned areas of its neighbors.⁸

Regardless of the geographical classification, there is no disputing that the countries contained within and bordering the Trans-Saharan region are faced with extremely difficult and interwoven challenges. This is evident in the *Failed States Index*, which analyzes a country's stability. Of the primary countries included in the TSCTP, all but Senegal was classified in the least stable 25 percent of 178 countries analyzed in 2013. Chad (5th worst) and Nigeria (16th worst) were determined as the least stable of the TSCTP countries. Just as troubling for the TSCTP countries and the international community, neighbors in all directions also scored poorly with the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic all holding spots in the bottom ten countries in the world for stability.⁹

A country by country examination of the region quickly highlights the many challenges facing the Trans-Saharan nations. The result is a very unstable region with countries limited in their abilities to give support to their neighbors or, conversely, secure their borders from destabilizing forces transiting from their neighbors. From a USG perspective, these circumstances translate into a strategy that makes it extremely difficult to counter the emergent and shifting terrorism threats without undermining other stability efforts and broader U.S. interests.



U.S. Interests in the Trans-Sahara

A 2011 Congressional Research Service report on U.S. interests in Africa acknowledged that the “U.S. security policy has been driven largely in recent years by counterterrorism efforts, which the Bush and Obama Administrations have both identified as a top national security priority.”¹⁰ However, beyond counterterrorism efforts, it becomes harder to identify why this part of Africa is, in the words of President Obama, “more important than ever to the security and prosperity of the international community, and to the United States in particular.”¹¹

John Campbell and J. Peter Pham maintain that the Trans-Sahara/Pan-Sahel has been “long known as a region of weak, poorly governed, corrupt states,” that face “challenges of radical Islam, narcotics trafficking and other criminal networks, and growing environmental stress...”¹² These problems are fueled by rampant corruption, widespread poverty, growth in disenfranchised youth, and an uptick in violent crime. In its current state, there are few, if any, economic interests for the USG in the Trans-Sahara other than the oil industry in Nigeria, but this oil is only a small percentage of total U.S. imported crude oil.¹³

Consequently, USG interests in the Trans-Sahara seem more tactical than strategic, yet more idealistic than pragmatic. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, tried to capture the essence of USG interests in a keynote address to the 2013 TSCTP Conference: “It is in the United States’ interest to build enduring, institutional partnerships with Africa and the Middle East, built on mutual understanding and respect for the rule of law, human rights, and democratic values.”¹⁴ So, considering all of these circumstances, what exactly is the U.S. role in the Trans-Sahara and how does CT tackle these complex issues?

Challenges to U.S. CT Efforts

With the TSCTP as the primary interagency tool for its involvement in the area, the USG is reaping marginal, if any, strategic dividends. Counterterrorism is certainly a reasonable and politically popular means to garner domestic and international support. Nevertheless, using CT as the main effort to promote U.S. interests discounts the root causes and complexity of Trans-Saharan troubles. The inability to improve, stabilize or in some cases, create effective governance significantly undermines the enduring value of any CT efforts. Additionally, the USG’s concentrated focus on Islamic extremists may overstate the role of these organizations in the region and, in turn, diminish support to bigger areas of concern. Finally, although regional partnerships are critical to long-term success, the immense lack of resources and support from partners, both inside and outside of Africa, makes long-term efforts unsustainable.

A Deficit of Governance

Good governance is not a straight-forward endeavor anywhere in the Trans-Sahara. These governments regularly lack popular support, resources, rule of law, and effective law enforcement capabilities. Further complicating the problems, key personnel are frequently corrupt, and government leaders often lack the legitimacy to make positive change. Conversely, even when effective governance exists in the more populated areas, the vast rural geography creates large pockets of space with limited government control. Lack of government presence opens the door to non-state actors who are able to exploit the relative freedom of movement to create safe havens for criminal, anti-government, and terrorist-related activities.¹⁵

Due to the great diversity and conflicting loyalties in the area, even with an effective CT program the TSCTP does little to bolster governance and thus does little to eliminate safe havens or future activities. In addition, along with interstate conflicts such as with Mali and Mauritania there are conflicts between tribes, castes, transnational criminal organizations, government officials, and religious sects.¹⁶ These dynamic relationships make unified local leadership and loyalty almost impossible to maintain, often making CT successes short-lived.



Nigeria, which is one of the USG's strongest partners in the region and a key member of the TSCTP, underscores the challenges to regional governance. Despite holding one of the world's top-ten oil reserves, a democratically elected government, and a strong military it remains one of the world's poorest and most corrupt countries.¹⁷ With more than 250 different ethnic groups and a distinct Muslim-Christian population split, the country has experienced decades of civil violence and is a hub for drug trafficking, piracy, and religious extremism.¹⁸ Accordingly, even if the TSCTP enables the Nigerians to suppress the violence of Islamic extremist groups such as Boko Haram, it does little to address the corruption, ethno-religious divisions, or government corruption.¹⁹ As such, this lawlessness spills across the Nigerian borders and feeds regional instability.

Good governance also requires the rule of law and the ability to enforce laws. Richard Downie asserts that throughout much of Africa, "police are ineffective, unprofessional, corrupt, even predatory."²⁰ As has been witnessed in recent years, poor law enforcement, coupled with poor governance and poverty, has made the Trans-Sahara an ideal location for international criminals.²¹ The resultant high crime rates and unchecked violence further diminish local perceptions of already weak governments. Unfortunately, with trust in state law enforcement so low, the police are, as Downie adds, "often sources of insecurity rather than providers of security."²² TSCTP efforts to bolster CT capacity across the region assume a perceived need for, and buy-in from, not only the national governments, but also the local populace. Without the support of the people, the CT efforts risk disenfranchising the people even further, making strong governance even harder to achieve and sustain.

Al-Qaeda Behind Every Bush?

Even to the most casual follower of U.S. affairs during the last decade, there was absolutely no doubt that countering terrorism is one of, if not the principal, component in many of its domestic and foreign policies. Furthermore, no group associated with terrorism drives America's concern and resolve more than Al-Qaeda (AQ). The USG has made it its mission to monitor, hunt for, and, when needed, kill members of AQ and its numerous regional off-shoots anywhere on the globe. Operating across the northern Sahara, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has established itself as AQ's African affiliate and the USG has made the defeat of AQIM a priority.²³

It is clear that the ungoverned areas of the Trans-Sahara—specifically northern Mali and the border areas between Algeria, Niger, and Libya—have become growing safe havens for AQIM and other Islamist groups such as Ansar al Din.²⁴ It is also clear that preventing the Sahel from becoming the next jihadist breeding ground, like Afghanistan prior to 9/11, is a national security priority for the USG. What is unclear is whether countering this Islamist movement is a priority for the local governments and populace.

Not unlike what the USG has experienced in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Horn of Africa, the degrees of Islamic extremism, historic alliances, and individual loyalties are varied and dynamic. In Mali, for example, though AQIM may find it relatively secure and offer an attractive alternative to some locals, its ideology and tactics also conflict with the local status quo. During the 2012 rebellion against the government of Mali, AQIM allied with Ansar al Din and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa to support the Movement for Liberation of Azawad and Tuareg minority in the north.²⁵ However, in the aftermath internal disputes quickly arose between these groups. Many of the AQIM fighters are foreigners and the strict application of Sharia law, especially towards women, was not welcomed in some areas.²⁶

In addition to differences in ethnicity and application of Islamic principles, conflicts have developed over long-controlled smuggling routes and control of criminal, and thus, economic, activities.²⁷ Shifting alliances and unique grievances make it nearly impossible for any element of TSCTP to accurately identify long-term allies or supporters in the region. Moreover, efforts from outsiders risk being interpreted as indiscriminate and threaten to unite seemingly disparate groups and further radicalize the populace.²⁸



The USG is leveraging its desires to counter terrorist ideology through the TSCTP. For the last eight years, the USG has collaborated with its TSCTP partners to gain only a small foothold in the region to counter this growing threat. Using both Department of Defense and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) personnel, the effort has focused on training military forces and increasing intelligence sharing in order to improve CT readiness, border security, and outreach programs promoting religious tolerance.²⁹

As already mentioned, wherever AQ appears, the USG is close behind. In 2014, the DOS requested more than \$40 million for African CT assistance, which is more than the same type of aid for Afghanistan and Pakistan combined.³⁰ Moreover, from FY2011-FY2013, Mali was the top worldwide recipient of USG CT assistance, totaling more than \$13 million. During this same time, Chad, Mauritania, and Morocco have also been among the top CT assistance recipients.³¹ Considering the lack of progress in stabilizing the region and the growth, rather than the suppression, of AQIM elements, one has to wonder if it is worth continuing to put good money after bad.

Scarce Resources, Scarce Support

The unifying themes of the TSCTP are counterterrorism, strengthening regional capacities, and mutually beneficial partnerships. But, aside from the woefully under-resourced Trans-Saharan partners and several United Nations (UN) peacekeeping efforts, international support to the TSCTP is almost negligible. Although identified by successive administrations as a region important to U.S. national interests, there has been a justifiable unwillingness to commit substantial military forces to the region. While medical support missions and projects led by USAID certainly add benefit, the current level of USG commitment will do little to effect change anywhere in the region. Additionally, weak intergovernmental organizations (IGO), such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), do not have the means, either financially or personnel-wise, to commit to long-term stability efforts.

The Department of Defense is supporting the TSCTP through AFRICOM and Operation Enduring Freedom-Trans Sahara. Consistent with what has been discussed already in this analysis, AFRICOM's top strategic concern is emerging terrorist networks in Africa and its number one command priority is countering violent extremist organizations.³² Yet, CT is not AFRICOM's only priority. Operating with a relatively small command staff and limited, rotational forces, the command is also concentrating on maritime security off both of Africa's coasts, instability across North Africa, and the illegal trafficking of drugs and arms.³³ It has also been active recently with airlift support to peacekeeping efforts in South Sudan and the Central African Republic. It is evident that AFRICOM is simply not resourced to provide a dedicated and sufficient military response to any of these areas.

To its credit, the UN has tried to help where it can, but its resources are also limited. The UN is currently conducting 15 peacekeeping operations around the globe, with eight missions in Africa alone.³⁴ Already engaged in neighboring areas such as Western Sahara, Darfur, and South Sudan, the UN initiated its Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali in March of 2013 to help suppress widespread violence throughout the country. However, a year later, less than half of the authorized 11,200 personnel are in the country and only 71 of the more than 300 authorized police officers are in place.³⁵ With a limited pool of resources to tap into, the UN is struggling just to keep the populations safe and is not even close to addressing the root causes of the violence.

The AU and ECOWAS are the two most relevant organizations in Africa as it pertains to issues in the Trans-Sahara. Like the UN, however, they lack the resources to be effective contributors to long-term solutions. Unlike the UN, these organizations face a tarnished history when it comes to interventions. Dealing with a lack of legitimacy and struggling with rule of law in their own countries, peacekeepers operating under the auspices of the AU and ECOWAS have been accused of crimes and abuses against the populace during missions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Sudan.³⁶ In short, the



AU and ECOWAS do not currently have the legitimacy or resources even to attempt to solve the problems of their regional neighbors.

The CT-First Approach: The Best or Only Option?

Proponents of the current TSCTP approach would likely justify the CT focus using two central themes. First, the increased presence of terrorist organizations and growth of Islamic extremism in the Trans-Sahara is a legitimate threat to the United States and its allies. Fueling this position is the confirmed movement of substantial amounts of small arms and weaponry out of Libya into the Sahel after the fall of the Gaddafi government. In testimony to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Nii Akuetteh argued that Mali has become the epicenter of terrorism in the Trans-Sahara and can serve as a base for future attacks on African neighbors, Europe, and the United States.³⁷ If Mali is indeed a regional hub of terrorism, then it could be argued that CT may be the most appropriate way to improve security while also addressing U.S. national interests.

A second likely theme from proponents of continued investment in CT is more practical. Considering the breadth and depth of problems in the Trans-Sahara, it could be argued that a CT-focused approach is the only realistic means to actually support USG interests. With no real chance of solving the bigger, underlying problems, a CT approach essentially bypasses any nation-building tendencies and addresses USG priorities first and foremost. Additionally, this small foothold in the region enables the USG to nurture key relationships and eases the diplomatic challenges of conducting unilateral CT missions within the region. If nothing else, the CT effort, even if unsuccessful, positions the USG to avoid having to answer to why it is doing nothing in the region.

As compelling as these arguments may be, in the larger picture it is evident that the use of CT as the unifying force is not working. During the eight years with a direct USG presence in the region, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger have all experienced military coups which, under U.S. law, automatically suspend USG security assistance.³⁸ In addition to these three countries, Burkina Faso, Tunisia, and Senegal were all ranked in the top ten worsening states in the *2013 Failed States Index*.³⁹ In the less governed spaces, as the recent events in Mali highlight, the presence of AQIM does not seem to be lessened, but rather, emboldened. Lastly, as the recent Boko Haram kidnappings have highlighted, extremism in Nigeria is not close to subsiding. In fact, over the last three years, despite U.S. support to Nigeria through the TSCTP, Boko Haram has been involved in more than 4,000 deaths, including more than 1,000 in 2014 alone.⁴⁰

Is CT Success Possible or Sustainable?

As it stands, the heavy emphasis on countering terrorist elements in the Trans-Sahara severely discounts the deeply rooted societal issues that create the existing utopia for extremism and violence. Considering the scant financial and human capital available from local and regional sources, limited governmental capacity of TSCTP partner nations, and negligible U.S. national will to put substantial boots on the ground; the prudent move for the USG is to re-focus its strategy in the Trans-Sahara. Because, without addressing the bigger, deeper grievances throughout the region, the USG's laser-like focus on CT may actually undermine any actual stabilization.

There are no easy or quick solutions to the many problems across the Trans-Sahara. So, how do strategists, planners, and CT operators develop a strategy that is both successful and sustainable over the long term? First and foremost, in the strategic context of the Trans-Sahara, the CT infrastructure should be viewed as a ways and means rather than an ends in itself. In other words, CT should be used as a specialized tool to strengthen regional relationships, not as the main effort. Additionally, while it is unlikely that a perfect strategy exists or can be developed, any future U.S. CT strategy for the Trans-Sahara that stands a chance at being effective and long-lasting should be predicated on the following concepts:



Practical & Realistic Expectations

- Recognize the limitations of sustaining U.S.-backed and funded partner capacity. High-level and sensitive intelligence technology is not viable without a constant U.S. presence. Air assets are limited in number. Mobility assets (air or ground) are restricted by the significant size of the Trans-Sahara and limited forward operating bases. Creating capabilities that rely on these assets will create an unhealthy dependency and decrease self-reliance.
- Resist the urge to “stabilize the Libya-Niger-Mali corridor.”⁴¹ These smuggling routes have existed for centuries and are a key economic driver in the region. Even if the economic activity is illegal or unregulated, it is a key component of the region and culture. Outsiders are conspicuous and are not wanted or welcome. Attempting to shut down these routes will prove to be a futile effort and may actually be counter-productive.

African-Led

- Resources, training, and capacity at the ministerial levels of government will help build legitimacy and allow Africans to lead the fight against African problems.
- Augment the tactical training focus with bolstered training and mentorship for senior military leaders and mid-level government officials. Without stronger governance and oversight tactical successes at the battalion level and below will be fleeting and short-lived.
- Strengthen support and training for AU and ECOWAS officials. Long-term success will depend on the cooperation of regional partners, not force-feeding from U.S. training teams. Interventions using indigenous personnel with better cultural understanding will provide more stability than with U.S. forces.
- Leverage IGO involvement in the region as much as practical. Although some IGOs will refuse to work with CT forces, those that will bring years of relationships, trust, and cultural knowledge with them.

Coalition Supported

- If the terrorism threat does, in fact, threaten our European allies, seek involvement and partnerships from the EU and greater international community to improve law enforcement capacity and training programs in the region.
- Since the instability is a concern of NATO countries, consider leveraging the NATO special operations infrastructure to address CT missions collectively and to train through a collective approach. As country participation increases, so will the legitimacy of the efforts.

Commitment

- The TSCTP covers a lot of countries and an immense amount of territory. To bolster the chances of long-term effectiveness, U.S./coalition commitment cannot be seen as fickle or transient. Any U.S. CT strategy in the region should avoid the temptation to pick up and move from country to country chasing terrorists. Even if the presence is small, the U.S. strategy should show long-term commitment if trust is to be established and sustained.

Concluding Thoughts

Without a doubt, CT is a vital national interest for the United States. However, widespread poverty, rampant corruption, and religious and tribal divisions throughout the Trans-Sahara cannot be improved overnight or with a CT-focused strategy. Despite the initiative and efforts of the TSCTP, along with tens of millions of dollars in aid and equipment, progress has been continually plagued by setbacks and shifting military and political relationships.⁴² Additionally, the number of countries that need support is daunting and impossible to address bilaterally. In short, the current USG approach of dumping money and training into CT capabilities is inadequate and impractical.

Many scholars and diplomats that have offered suggestions for addressing the problems in the Trans-Sahara and many of their recommendations are similar calling for the long-view rather than small tactical engagements. Andre Le Sage sums up the recommendations succinctly, albeit idealistically: “There must be substantial, sustained, and continent-wide investment in capacity building for intelligence, law enforcement, military, prosecutorial, judicial, and penal systems, not to mention their parliamentary, media, and civil society counterparts.”⁴³ In essence, as Le Sage suggests, African society needs to be built anew—a task well beyond the capacity of the TSCTP. Taking all of the available information into consideration, it is readily apparent that the current, CT-led approach is insufficient and possibly degenerative.

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