

## Ominous Africa – The Future of Terrorism?

The mass kidnapping of 234 school girls last month and subsequent deadly attacks currently sweeping throughout Nigeria have elevated the terror group Boko Haram to worldwide headlines almost overnight. The media's portrayal of Boko Haram as "superstar monsters" even seemed to embolden the group, raising the possibility of an attack on a U.S. target.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the atrocities and aspirations of the Nigerian terror group are the growing global security threats emerging across the greater continent. "Africa in the very near future will be the main theater of counter-terrorism in the world, not Pakistan, Afghanistan or Yemen."<sup>2</sup> Could an entire continent really be that dangerous?

The scale and scope of Africa is often unfathomable. As a continent, it's larger than the U.S., China, India, Mexico, Peru, France, Spain, Papua New Guinea, Sweden, Japan, Germany, Norway, Italy, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Greece...combined. The Arab nations of North Africa are generally associated with the Middle East. The 49 countries of Sub-Saharan Africa represent a diversity of cultural and physical landscapes, but still share ongoing struggles with governance, civil society, infrastructure, social welfare, economic development, and ethnic and religious conflicts. The Arab Spring uprisings gave Islamic fundamentalists renewed momentum and opportunity in the northern part of the country, while the trend in the south has been "global terror groups, including al-Qaeda affiliates, [overtaking] local insurgent organizations and transform[ing] them into regional and international threats."<sup>3</sup>

The results have been deadly. Kenya, Somalia, Algeria, Mali and Nigeria were the scenes of major terrorist attacks in 2013. Somalia's al-Shabaab militant Islamic group called their assault on the upscale Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi that killed 67 people retribution for Kenya's military intervention in Somalia. Also responsible for suicide bombings in Uganda that killed 74 people watching the 2010 World Cup final, Al-Shabaab is a growing threat in East Africa.

In West Africa, Boko Haram's recent surge of violent activity will likely increase and is already showing signs of spilling over into Chad, Cameroon, and Niger. Sectarian conflict in Central African Republic and South Sudan are expected to bring more instability to the middle of the continent.

The Sahel, a semiarid region below the Sahara extending from Senegal to the Sudan, has provided ample training and battle grounds for terror groups. Boko Haram is known to have trained in Mali, for example. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) operating in Mali "has already accomplished something no other al-Qaeda franchise has ever been able to pull off: conquering and governing a broad swath of a sovereign country, then using it as a base to plot

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<sup>1</sup> Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, "Opinion: Media turns Boko Haram into 'superstar monsters,'" *CNN*, May 19, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/19/opinion/boko-haram-media-opinion/>; Robert Windrem, "Washington Worries Boko Haram Planning Attack on U.S. Interests in Africa," *NBC News*, May 22, 2014, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/missing-nigeria-schoolgirls/washington-worries-boko-haram-planning-attack-u-s-interests-africa-n112536>.

<sup>2</sup> Mustapha Ajbaili, "Is Africa the new frontier of global terrorism?" *Al Arabiya News*, November 30, 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/11/30/Is-Africa-the-new-frontier-of-global-terrorism-.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Charlotte Florance, "Al-Qaeda and Other Terrorist Groups Increasing in Africa," *The Foundry*, May 6, 2014, <http://blog.heritage.org/2014/05/06/al-qaeda-terrorist-groups-increasing-africa/>.

sophisticated attacks outside its borders.”<sup>4</sup> The U.S. has already suffered as a result of this achievement. AQIM, for example, is believed to have trained Libyan fighters who participated in the deadly attacks on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi. AQIM and other related Islamists in Mali also were behind attacks on a natural gas facility in Algeria that killed 37 hostages, including three Americans. A French-led intervention in Mali last year to counter Islamic militant offensives may have only temporarily quelled terror threats. AQIM is expected to resurge in Mali and expand into Chad after the drawdown of French troops.<sup>5</sup>

So what does all of this mean for the United States and global security? “Africa’s Islamists are able to take advantage of the fact that many of the continent’s countries have porous borders; weak and corrupt central governments; undertrained and underequipped militaries; flourishing drug trades that provide a steady source of income; and vast, lawless spaces that are so large – and so far away from major American military bases like those in the Middle East and Afghanistan – that it would be difficult for the U.S. to mount effective counterterror.”<sup>6</sup>

Last year, a U.S. Africa Command spokesman, downplayed the continent’s potential as a collective threat. “Africa is too large and diverse a continent for such a sweeping assessment. While you often hear about serious security problems in pockets, most of the continent is actually doing well.”<sup>7</sup> Africa’s reality is more the half full and half empty glass. Overall, annual GDP growth across Africa has averaged nearly five percent since 2000 and the average poverty rate in sub-Saharan African countries has fallen by about one percent every year since 1996. However, these countries depend widely on exporting commodities and their economies are vulnerable. Private capital investments of \$50 billion a year now exceed foreign aid, but those investments have widened income inequalities. Meanwhile, political instability is still widespread.<sup>8</sup>

While Boko Haram may be a stark reminder of the dangers of rampant terrorism, it also reveals that terror threats to global security coming out of Africa have been sidelined for too long. Africa’s volatility has created the opportunity for terror groups to organize, strengthen, and operate. “Those are also the reasons American officials worry that a successful terror attack in the U.S. or Europe planned in Africa and carried out by African extremists is only a matter of time. The new face of militant Islam, in other words, is likely to be an African one.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Yochi Dreazen, “The New Terrorist Training Ground,” *The Atlantic*, September 18, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/10/the-new-terrorist-training-ground/309446/>.

<sup>5</sup> John Nugent, “Six Places at Risk of Terrorism in Africa,” *Forbes*, February 6, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/riskmap/2014/02/06/six-places-at-risk-of-terrorism-in-africa/>.

<sup>6</sup> Yochi Dreazen, “The New Terrorist Training Ground,” op.cit.

<sup>7</sup> Mustapha Ajbaili, “Is Africa the new frontier of global terrorism?” op.cit.

<sup>8</sup> Shantayanan Devarajan and Wolfgang Fengler, “Africa’s Economic Boom; Why the Pessimists and the Optimists Are Both Right,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2013, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139109/shantayanan-devarajan-and-wolfgang-fengler/africas-economic-boom>.

<sup>9</sup> Yochi Dreazen, “The New Terrorist Training Ground,” op.cit.