

Islamic Fundamentalism, Terrorism and al-Qaeda in East Africa and the Horn
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East Africa and the Horn (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan) are located at the vortex of Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism and al-Qaeda activity in sub-Saharan Africa. Terrorists killed sixteen people in 1980 at an Israeli-owned hotel in Nairobi. Al-Qaeda sponsored attacks destroyed the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998. They bombed an Israeli-owned hotel north of Mombasa, Kenya in 2002 and just missed bringing down a chartered Israeli aircraft in the same incident. The 2002 attacks near Mombasa have been linked to an al-Qaeda cell operating in Somalia. Sudan has a history of attacks such as the 1973 assassination by Black September in Khartoum of the American ambassador and deputy chief of mission and a Belgian diplomat. Sudan also once supported international terrorist organizations; Osama bin Laden and his deputy lived in Sudan from 1991 to 1996. Egyptian-based Gama'at al-Islamiya failed in its attempt to assassinate Egyptian President Mubarak in Addis Ababa in 1995. There have been many more terrorist incidents in nearly all of these countries that were perpetrated by local groups for internal political purposes.

There are several reasons why this region has become so impacted by international terrorism. During the last fifty years most of the countries have experienced significant internal conflict and instability. Only Tanzania and, to some extent, Kenya have managed to avoid long running internal instability or war with a neighbor. Even Tanzania once joined Ugandan dissidents to overthrow the Idi Amin regime in Uganda. Such a security climate is disruptive and makes it easy to procure weapons used by terrorists. Poverty and lack of development are omnipresent in the region. It seems to be politically correct in recent years to suggest that poverty and terrorism are not related or perhaps only minimally related. This is nonsense. Poverty provides an environment that better educated and more prosperous terrorist leaders can and do exploit. In addition, corruption is rampant in some of these states and a serious problem in the remainder. This makes it easier for terrorists to conduct surreptitiously their nefarious deeds.

Governments in the region exercise limited control over some of their territory; Somalia remains a vacuum that is open to any terrorist with initiative and money. Sudan is still trying to end a civil war that resumed in 1983. Uganda has been unable to eliminate the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda. The security and intelligence services in all of these countries are under funded and ill equipped to counter committed terrorists. The same can be said about American diplomatic and intelligence resources in the region. Most of these states are located across from and have close links with the

Arabian Peninsula, the source of most of today's Islamic militants. It is easy to move between the Gulf States and East Africa and the Horn by air and sea. The lengthy coastline from Eritrea to Tanzania is poorly monitored; the borders between these states are porous. Chairman of the House Africa Subcommittee, Ed Royce, in a hearing two weeks ago on terrorism in Africa described the entire continent as the "soft underbelly" in the war on terror. If the continent is the soft-underbelly, East Africa and the Horn constitute the navel.

Nearly all of the international terrorism in the region has links to extremist Islamic groups. All of these countries are either predominantly Muslim or have important Muslim minorities. Sudan, Somalia, including self-declared independent Somaliland, and Djibouti are predominantly Muslim. Ethiopia and Eritrea are about fifty percent Muslim. Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania have significant Muslim minorities while Tanzania's islands of Zanzibar and Pemba are overwhelmingly Muslim. It is true that Muslim Sufi sects, which tend to resist the philosophy of Islamic fundamentalism, are strong throughout the region. It only takes a small number of local sympathizers, however, to accommodate the plans of international terrorists who operate in the area and are relatively well financed.

Financing of terrorism in East Africa and the Horn comes from a variety of sources, but high on the list are the charities sponsored by Saudi Arabia and some of the Gulf States. The money for these charities comes from private individuals and governments. In the case of Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent Qatar, the charities are closely linked with efforts to promote their fundamentalist Sunni Islam creed known as Wahhabism. The Saudis prefer to use the term Salafism, which has shed some of the extreme beliefs of Wahhabism, although the latter term continues to predominate in the media. Saudi Arabia created the state-financed Muslim World League in 1962 to promote its Wahhabi, pan-Islamic vision and ideology. The League finances mosques, schools, libraries, hospitals and clinics. Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti, its highest religious authority, serves as president.

A number of organizations fall under the jurisdiction of the Muslim World League, including the al-Haramain Islamic Foundation and the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO). Ostensibly, al-Haramain provides shelter, food, clothing, education and vocational training for orphans, "children of the martyred" and the poor. The stated goal of IIRO is to provide assistance to Muslim victims of natural disasters and wars. Another organization based in Saudi Arabia and linked to financial support of terrorism is the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY). Its goal is to support Muslim organizations worldwide. The aims of the Qatar Charitable Society are similar to those of the Saudi charities.

These Saudi and Gulf State charities have been active in East Africa and the Horn for years. In addition to encouraging fundamentalist Wahhabi beliefs, building mosques and implementing useful social programs, some of their branches have funneled money to al-Qaeda and associated terrorist organizations. In March 2002 the U.S. and Saudi Arabia jointly designated the Somalia branch of al-Haramain as an organization that had

supported terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Somali-based al-Ittihad al-Islamiya. In January 2004 the U.S. and Saudi Arabia notified the UN Sanctions Committee that the branches of al-Haramain in Kenya and Tanzania provided financial, material and logistical support to the al-Qaeda network and other terrorist organizations. They called for a seizure of the assets of both branches. The U.S. had earlier accused the former director of al-Haramain in Tanzania of planning the 1998 attacks on the American embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi and plotting to attack several Zanzibari hotels in 2003. At the request of the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, the government of Tanzania recently deported the two top al-Haramain officials and closed the office. They left behind 136 mosques and an Islamic Center. The World Assembly of Muslim Youth and Jeddah-based World Supreme Council for Mosques have also been active in Tanzania.

The Muslim World League has an office in Kenya and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth conducts occasional activities there. Following the 1998 bombings of American embassies in East Africa, the Kenyan government deregistered the local offices of the International Islamic Relief Organization and Mercy International Relief Agency for alleged connections with terrorists. Several months later IIRO resumed activities following approval from the Kenyan government. Before the U.S. and Saudi Arabia sanctioned the al-Haramain branch in Kenya, the government of Kenya had revoked the office's registration, a move quickly overturned by Kenya's High Court. Three Kenyans are currently being tried for plotting to bomb the U.S. embassy in 1998 and conspiring to attack the new American embassy several years later. Four other Kenyans have been charged in the terrorist attack on the Israeli-owned hotel in Mombasa.

The situation in Kenya is complicated by a Muslim minority, perhaps as small as ten percent of the population, which strongly supports the activities of the Islamic charities and is generally hostile to the U.S. The Secretary-General of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims commented after September 11 that many Kenyans support the Taliban in Afghanistan. The current leader, a Yemeni, of the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK) also supported the Taliban at the end of 2002 and denounced cooperation between the U.S. and Kenya on security issues. CIPK received money from al-Haramain, supports the outlawed Islamic Party of Kenya and is thought to have links with al-Ittihad in Somalia. Just last month the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims petitioned President Kibaki to allow two Saudi charities to resume financial aid to Islamic institutions in Kenya. The Kenya Assembly of Ulama, Wise Community of Kenya Muslims, South Coast Council of Imams and the National Union of Kenya Muslims, with the affectionate acronym NUKEM, joined the petition. They argued that shutting down the charities had retarded implementation of development projects such as Koranic schools and Muslim colleges, especially on the Kenyan coast.

Uganda has not been the focus of Wahhabi related activity. This may be due to influence in the country by Libya, which exports an ideology that competes with Wahhabism. The Muslim World League had, and may still have, an office in Uganda. The World Assembly of Muslim Youth, which has a representative in Uganda, held in 2003 a course for imams in Jinja. The course emphasized Islamic training for youth. Terrorist incidents in Uganda in recent years appear to be linked to local groups.

Ethiopia has experienced more than its share of terrorist attacks, but except for the attempt on the life of President Mubarak they have been linked to local groups and al-Ittihad in neighboring Somalia. Although Wahhabi charities such as al-Haramain and IIRO have been active in Ethiopia, they seem to have focused their efforts on propagating the faith, building Koranic schools and mosques and providing emergency aid. Some of the practices they encourage, such as destruction of tomb stones and burning non-Wahhabi mosques, have incurred the wrath of the moderate Muslim majority. Ethiopia's Supreme Council of Muslims continues to struggle with Wahhabism within its ranks.

Eritrea, which is located across the Red Sea from Saudi Arabia, seems to have avoided significant Wahhabi attention. Al-Haramain established a medical center in Eritrea. During the mid-1990s, the Qatar Charitable Society reportedly funded the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement, which carried out attacks against Eritrea from neighboring Sudan. Wahhabi activity has also been limited in Djibouti, although the leadership is linked to al-Islah, an organization engaged in school and clinic construction that receives funding from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. Djibouti has requested additional assistance from the Muslim World League to fight illiteracy and hunger and WAMY has a representative there. Djibouti also serves as the headquarters for 1,800 American personnel assigned to the Combined Joint Task Force—Horn of Africa, which coordinates counter-terrorism operations in the airspace and land area of Somalia, Kenya, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Yemen.

Sudan is the only country in the region that tried during the 1990s to export Islamic fundamentalism and for many years allowed terrorist organizations to operate there. Sudan has not, however, been fertile ground for Wahhabism. Although Osama bin Laden and his deputy lived in Sudan, bin Laden had poor relations with Saudi Arabia at the time. The House of Saud also disliked Hassan al-Turabi, who was influential in Sudan's government until President Bashir removed him in 1999. Al-Haramain, the Qatar Charitable Society and WAMY have had modest programs in Sudan.

Somalia, because it remains a failed state, offers the largest challenge to those who want to reign in terrorism in the region. Neither Somalis nor their predominantly Sufi form of Islam are natural allies of Islamic fundamentalism. A broken state, the temptation of receiving funding for personal or community gain and the education of a small number of Somalis in fundamentalist institutions outside the country have created the problem. Two Somali Islamic fundamentalist organizations—al-Ittihad and al-Islah—have ties to Wahhabism and receive funding from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. The more dangerous of the two is al-Ittihad, which has been on the U.S. terrorist exclusion list since 2001. It has had contact with al-Qaeda and probably received some al-Qaeda training, although the degree of cooperation between the two organizations is in dispute. The Muslim World League, IIRO and al-Haramain have been implicated with al-Ittihad, which conducted a number of terrorist attacks against Ethiopia in the mid-1990s. Al-Ittihad also builds schools and mosques, provides free lunches and supports Islamic courts. The U.S. believes al-Ittihad had ties with al-Barakat, the Somali money transfer company whose assets the U.S. seized in 2001 for alleged cooperation with al-Qaeda. Al-Islah, a more benign organization, supports Islamic schools and courts,

clinics, vocational training, Mogadishu University and community centers in Somalia. Along with al-Ittihad, it supports creation of an Islamic state in Somalia but has not resorted to military force to achieve its objectives.

Self-proclaimed independent Somaliland has recently experienced terrorism. In the early 1990s, al-Ittihad had a foothold in Los Anod in the southeastern part of the country. They were forced out; the government of Somaliland is uneasy with Wahhabi activity and has poor relations with Saudi Arabia, although it has permitted a representative of al-Haramain to operate out of Burao. Somaliland seemed to be free of terrorist activity. The assassination since last fall of an Italian doctor, two British aid workers and a Kenyan working for a German NGO have caused the government to conclude recently that either al-Ittihad or al-Qaeda was behind these attacks.

Because these charities perform some useful work, at least for Muslim communities, their forced closure often results in a negative reaction as happened in Kenya. Many Somalis reacted the same way after the U.S. and Saudi Arabia shut down the al-Haramain operation, which supported more than 2,000 orphans. The orphanages closed, angering many Somalis and creating new enemies for the U.S. Some way needs to be found to cut off money for terrorists while not exacerbating local social problems.

The al-Qaeda attacks against Saudi Arabia in May and November of 2003 energized the Saudi government to take seriously the war against terrorism and its unsupervised financial support for Saudi charities. During testimony in late March before the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, Juan Zarate, and the State Department's Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Cofer Black, outlined the steps that Saudi officials have recently taken in cooperation with the U.S. to crack down on Saudi charities that have supported terrorists. They acknowledged there is still much to do, but praised the Saudis for their cooperation so far.

African governments in the region must bear the primary responsibility for curbing terrorism. They know the different cultures and speak the local languages. How many American soldiers and civilian experts on terrorism speak fluent Swahili or Somali and have a solid understanding of the different cultures in Somalia or along the Swahili coast of Kenya and Tanzania? Precious few you can be sure. It is unrealistic for Americans (or other non-Africans) to enter that environment and expect to deal successfully with terrorism. In order to make significant progress, however, local governments require substantially increased financial assistance and training to improve their intelligence and security capacity, reduce corruption and poverty and increase economic development in areas where international terrorists now thrive. House Africa Subcommittee Chairman Royce emphasized at the recent hearing on terrorism in Africa that the U.S. needs to devote more resources for counterterrorism in Africa. He is correct. In some cases, African leaders in the region must reassess and redistribute their scarce economic development resources to areas that now provide a receptive environment to Islamic extremists. Without more assistance from wealthier nations, however, the challenges from international terrorism in this region will only increase.