



After London: Reassessing Africa's Role in the War on Terror

By Kurt Shillinger

Whether our current war is “on terrorism” or “against violent extremism,” it is unquestionably global. While centered in the greater Middle East, the fighting occurs from North America to Southeast Asia. One of the key theaters in this struggle is Africa—not just the Arab lands of North Africa, but much of the rest of the continent. No U.S. strategy for this war that fails to reckon with Africa’s role can be truly successful. The Bush administration and its allies are coming to realize this but have yet to address the full implications of the problem.

Sometime in 1999 Haroon Rashid Aswat slipped into the United States. A Briton of Indian descent, he made his way out to the Pacific Northwest where, according to U.S. officials, he plotted to set up a jihadi training camp in Bly, Oregon. Aswat had gained knowledge in explosives in Afghanistan and reportedly once bragged of meeting Osama bin Laden. Fast forward six years. On June 20, 2005, the United States filed charges against Aswat in a New York court. Shortly thereafter, he made his way from Great Britain to South Africa, where he slipped into the affluent Muslim community of Fordsburg, a warren of jumbled shop fronts and colonial-style houses on the southern edge of downtown Johannesburg. There, while ostensibly selling Islamic compact discs, he made at least twenty calls on his South African cellphone back to some of the young men who, on July 7, blew themselves up on three London subway trains and a bus.

The pieces in the public record do not fit together well, but the picture they begin to reveal is sufficiently suggestive to prompt important questions. Aswat, a British citizen, traveled on a South African passport. By the time he had

arrived in Johannesburg, he had fallen under the watchful eyes of South African, British, and U.S. intelligence officials. When and where did they pick up his trail? With whom did he associate in South Africa? How did he fund his movements (he apparently had about \$50,000 in U.S., British, and South African bank notes on him at the time of his arrest). And how was he able to leave Johannesburg after the London attacks and travel overland to Lusaka, Zambia—two countries to the north—where he was finally apprehended?

In the four years since the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington, Africa has been for the most part at the policy periphery of the Western-led global war on terror (GWOT). True, the United States has ramped up its military presence in Djibouti to about 1,800 troops to better monitor the Horn of Africa and the lower Arab Peninsula—Somalia and Yemen, in particular. But appropriations for counterterrorism interventions in Africa total only in the low hundreds of millions of dollars, and these activities range for the most part from occasional joint military training exercises in countries like Chad and Mali, to the enhancement of security tools at ports and borders in East African states and coordination with South

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African financial institutions to improve the tracking and screening of funds.

The Pentagon, the State Department, and a handful of other agencies are piecing together a new “holistic” project in nine states bordering the Sahara Desert to bolster security, governance, and civil society, but even this, according to the incoming assistant secretary of state for African affairs, Jendayi Frazer, is a “minor program.”¹ A similar mindset persists even in London. As chairman of the G8 and president of the European Union this year, British prime minister Tony Blair spurred a “big push” to eradicate poverty in Africa and set development on a rapid and sustainable course. The final report of his Commission for Africa, however, makes only passing reference to a link between Africa’s developmental and security challenges and international terrorism.² In the post-Cold War period, Great Britain, like the United States, has adopted a policy approach toward Africa that favors humanitarian engagement over hard-headed geopolitics.

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Western officials, meanwhile, have tended to regard South Africa, which has the best physical, financial, and communications infrastructure on the continent, as a relatively benign transit location for potential extremists and their activities, even though they quietly admit that Pretoria’s ability to monitor the flow of people moving across its borders is poor.

Even with the strong preoccupation with Afghanistan and Iraq, this lesser focus on Africa is hard to understand. Well before and continuously since 9/11 the continent has been a target for tragic attacks. Islam is growing faster in Africa than anywhere else in the world, and its growth even outpaces the spread of Christianity. The roots of radicalism reach back at least to the early 1990s and have now spread across the continent. Africa’s proximity to the

Middle East and Asia, its patchwork of weak and failing states, vast and poorly policed spaces, and wealth of natural resources make it highly vulnerable to external influences and exploitation. Its proximity to Europe, meanwhile, makes it an attractive staging ground for attacks against the West—as the train bombings in Madrid last year illustrate. As for London, the Africa tie-in reaches beyond Aswat. At least three of the suspects arrested in connection with the July 21 bombing attempts are of African origin.

What lessons, then, should be drawn from the growing London-Africa connection for the war on terror? What is the real extent of the threat posed by Africa to global peace and security in an age of global jihad? What policy reforms and types of engagement can help decrease that threat?

“This Magnificent African Cake”

In 1875, as Europe set its sights on the vast riches of a strange and distant continent, Belgian king Leopold II wrote to his ambassador in London, Henry Solvyns, “I do not want to miss a good chance of getting us a slice of this magnificent African cake.”³ From then until now, Africa has attracted foreign conquest of its resources. Today, with colonialism and the Cold War relegated to history’s dustbin, two new types of prospectors are moving in and across Africa. The first are the Chinese, so hungry for Africa’s resources that Beijing willingly engages with even the most corrupt and repressive regimes. The second are individual Muslims from states such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. The influx is greater than the outflow. Many come simply to find work and better ways of life. But the growth in foreign-funded mosques and madrassas indicates other interests, too. Some come to Africa to mine hearts and minds as well as stones and ore. Increasingly, the interests of these two kinds of prospectors are intersecting in places like Sudan and the Gulf of Guinea.

Since 9/11 Somalia has been and remains Washington’s greatest terrorism-related concern in Africa. The initial assumption was that Somalia, with its combination of state collapse and a predominantly Muslim population, would become the next Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban. Western leaders eagerly consumed bogus reports about al Qaeda training camps and activities in Somalia. That belief persists even today in some Western governments. But theories

about the link between weak and failed states and terrorism have evolved since 9/11. Terrorist organizations need adequate physical and financial infrastructure, the lack of which, as Ken Menkhaus effectively argues, has made Somalia unsuitable as a haven:

Terrorists, like mafias, prefer weak and corrupt government rather than no government at all. In the Horn of Africa, weak states such as Kenya and Tanzania are much more likely bases of operations for al-Qaeda. They feature sprawling, multi-ethnic urban areas where foreign operatives can go unremarked; corrupt law-enforcement agencies which can be bought off; and a rich array of Western targets. . . . [A] collapsed state such as Somalia is more likely to serve a niche role as a transit zone, through which men, money or materiel are quickly moved into the country and then across the borders of neighbouring states.⁴

This, in fact, is exactly what happened in both 1998 and 2002, when a suspected al Qaeda cell used Somalia as a staging ground first for the U.S. embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam and, four years later, in the bombing of a resort hotel and attempted shooting down of an Israeli charter airliner in Mombassa.

Other factors also make Somalia an unlikely long-term haven for organized foreign terrorist cells. First, the flat desert topography exposes hiding places to aerial surveillance. Second, high levels of banditry are as apt to affect terrorists as anyone else. Finally, the highly homogenous nature of Somali society makes it difficult for foreigners to blend in. For these and other reasons, the International Crisis Group has debunked a contention made by the United Nations earlier this year that an “army” of jihadists has established a network of training camps inside Somalia and that the local militant Islamist organization, Al-Ittihad al-Islami, has dwindled in numbers and influence:

In reality, *jihadism* is an unpopular, minority trend among Somali Islamists. Al-Ittihad’s military wing has been largely dismantled, the new *jihadi* network’s effective membership probably is in the tens rather than the hundreds, and ranking al-Qaeda operatives in Somalia probably number less than half a dozen.⁵

The continued identification of Somalia as the main terrorism threat in Africa oversimplifies the problem. In fact, Somalia exemplifies just one of three types of African states that present different opportunities to foreign Islamist radicals. These varying states require different types of policy interventions.

One other type is the relatively stable state, such as South Africa, Ghana, Botswana, and Ethiopia. These provide the infrastructure enabling extremist entities to transfer and launder funds and acquire material and logistical support for operations, but generally lack sufficient security controls and capacities. Aswat’s easy acquisition of a South African passport and cash in bulk underscores how easy it remains for foreigners and locals alike to exploit what these states offer. The third case is states with large Muslim populations and relatively weak and corrupt governance. These states, which include Tanzania, Kenya, Mali, and, arguably, Egypt, offer fertile terrain for external influences, providing foreign Islamist radical organizations with both recruits and causes. Egypt is a primary recipient of U.S. aid and support, but after twenty-five years of one-party rule under President Hosni Mubarak, the society is showing increasing signs of frustration. Four terrorist attacks in the last seven months reflect this.⁶

In his excellent analysis of global Muslim extremism, *Al Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, Jason Burke challenges the conventional view, so prevalent among Western officials, of al Qaeda as a worldwide top-down corporation. Rather, he places the modern threat on a scale of relativity. At one end are entities closely associated with bin Laden—or the traditionally perceived center of al Qaeda as an organization. At the other end are groups with no such established link.

This model of analysis is crucial to gauging the terrorism threat in Africa. The 1998 embassy bombings were carried out by Saudis and Egyptians strongly affiliated with bin Laden, including, it is believed, Mohammad Atef, bin Laden’s military chief and father of the wife of bin Laden’s second son. The 2003 bombings in Casablanca, in which thirty-nine people died, involved fourteen local suicide bombers with no apparent link to al Qaeda, Afghanistan, or Iraq. The June 1995 attack in Addis Ababa that nearly killed visiting President Mubarak was carried out by a Sudanese/Egyptian faction of the radical group Islamic Jihad run by Bin Laden’s closest associate, the Egyptian doctor Ayman al Zawahiri. The devastating bombing in Sharm el-Sheik, which ripped through a resort hotel killing more than

100, was carried out by Egyptian radicals with much looser connections to al Qaeda. The GSPC, a splinter radical Algerian group with an established cell in Madrid, has moderate links with bin Laden. There is evidence that this group may be spreading its reach southward into Mali, Niger, and Chad, although to what extent is unclear. The primary suspects in the London bombing, including Somali born Yasin Hassan Omar, Ethiopian-born Osman Hussein, and Mutkar Said Ibrahim, an Eritrean who gained British citizenship just two years ago, have no known links to bin Laden.

These cases point to two critical dimensions of the terrorism threat in Africa: First, over time, the links between radical groups and bin Laden, or the perceived center of al Qaeda, are becoming increasingly tenuous. Second, as the recent coup in Mauritania suggests, foreign “jihadist” ideologies are resonating among local entities in various pockets across the continent. This latter point, Burke argues, indicates not only the real danger of modern radical Islam, but also its aims:

The hundreds of groups, cells, movements, even individuals, lumped together under the rubric “Islamic terrorism” is enormously diverse. . . . Branding them all “Islamic terrorists” conceals the importance of local contingencies in the evolution of any group and hides the essentially political nature of their aim of creating a perfect, or at least better, society, even if that society is one run on a religion basis.⁷

Rethinking the Response

In the late-morning hours of July 7, Prime Minister Blair emerged from the G8 meetings he was hosting in Gleneagles, Scotland, to read a brief statement in reaction to the four bombs that had ripped through the London transport system earlier that morning. “Our determination to defend our values and our way of life,” he said, “is greater than their determination to cause death and destruction to innocent people in a desire to impose extremism on the world.”⁸ Like President Bush after 9/11, Blair was the picture of unwavering resolve. But the bombing in Sharm el-Sheik two and a half weeks later underscored how such utterances, while politically useful, have distorted the nature of the threat.

The Sharm el-Sheikh bombing, like the 2003 Casablanca bombing before it, makes two important points. First, attacks like 9/11 and 7/7 are not attempts to destroy Western civilization or democracy. Were this the immediate motivation of radical Islam, there would be no point in bombing non-Western targets. Rather, they are protests against the Western military presence in many Muslim countries; against support for selected corrupt, dictatorial Muslim governments; and against Western exploitation of Middle Eastern oil reserves. Second, which is corollary to the first and underscored by the diversity of radical Islamist activity taking place in Africa, the world is facing a global Islamic insurgency that is growing more diffuse and widespread by the day.

London highlights at least three reforms necessary to counter this challenge in Africa: first, redefinition of the essential nature of and international response to the global war on terrorism; second, clarification of the principles and legal instruments governing the apprehension of suspected international terrorists; and third, greater scrutiny on the evolving means of terror financing and document trafficking in Africa.

In mid-2003, not long after the U.S.-led coalition successfully toppled Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld circulated an internal memo—the most famous of all his many memos, nicknamed “snowflakes” in the Pentagon—in which he asked whether, in effect, the U.S. approach to countering terrorism was creating more terrorists than it was killing. The answer, many conclude from the insurgency in Iraq, may be yes. Rumsfeld’s question has prompted a vigorous reevaluation inside the Pentagon about how best to confront a spreading ideology rather than combating a monolithic enemy.⁹

The Defense Department has been at the forefront in the attempt to redefine that “global war on terror” as “the global struggle against violent extremism.” Although much of this redefinition is driven by a desire to narrow the scope of the war, at least one important question lies within: rather than ask, “Why do they hate us?” why not ask, “What causes radicalization?” The redefinition also invites a profound reshaping of the global response to terrorism away from a strict and ill-suited conventional warfare approach toward the kind of broader, counterinsurgency approach that has, for example, worked well in Afghanistan.

This is precisely the aim of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative, a new plan involving nine African partner states and, in Washington, the Pentagon, State,

Justice, and Treasury Departments, and the U.S. Agency for International Development. The list alone suggests the breadth of the approach: joint military training programs, which have already started, along with developmental assistance and initiatives to boost governance, strengthen border controls, monitor money laundering, and encourage the growth of civil society. It all sounds good and, importantly, draws the link between development and security neglected by Blair's Commission for Africa. But as the various agencies work through the appropriations process, some seem more concerned with the size of their slice of the pie rather than the details of the project.¹⁰ The current rush to inject Africa with large amounts of new cash, meanwhile, defies the historical record: after five decades of aid, the average African is poorer today than he was in 1970, and most African militaries and security agencies remain incompetent and corrupt.

Differentiating within Africa is essential. The United States should encourage its allies to follow its more holistic approach to countering terrorism in Africa, but should hold infirm its insistence that engaging with African governments be conditional on efforts to improve governance and beat corruption. Aswat's arrest highlights the need for harmonization of competing national priorities and interests in combating international terrorism and, importantly, greater success in translating surveillance into action. According to various accounts, the South African, British, and U.S. governments were at odds over how to handle Aswat following the bombings. The South Africans were disinclined to arrest him out of fear of agitating its own large Muslim community. The Americans and the British, meanwhile, both wanted Aswat in connection with different things—alleged activities in Oregon versus bombings in London—and neither was particularly willing to cede jurisdiction to the other.

Working on terrorism with governments such as South Africa's demands that Americans and others practice a more traditional kind of statecraft, one based not upon guilt for past policies but rooted in current realities. At the same time, however, Washington needs to be more attuned to the new imperatives emerging on the African continent. Western intelligence officers say they have a healthy cooperative arrangement with their South African counterparts. The South Africans find this almost comical. There is still strong resentment inside the now-ruling African National Congress over Washington's classification of

the erstwhile liberation movement as a terrorist organization in the 1980s, and consequently, little enthusiasm for working with the United States now on counterterrorism. Resolving this dispute is essential, especially in light of South Africa's limited capacity to monitor its ports and borders and prevent trafficking of essential documents like passports. A year ago, Intelligence Minister Ronnie Kasrils claimed that there were no foreign extremist networks operating inside South Africa. Following Aswat's arrest, he said that the apprehension "of individuals from abroad who have sought sanctuary in our country and who have intimate connections with terrorists such as al-Qaeda" is evidence of the effectiveness of South Africa's security system. Aswat's easy flight to Zambia—not to mention his entrance into South Africa on a bogus passport in the first instance—suggests otherwise.

Africa, Counterterrorism, and Counterinsurgency

The tragic attacks of the past four years in cities like New York, Washington, Madrid, and London have brought the West jarringly into a new and still evolving era of international relations and asymmetric threats. As it was initially conceived and carried out, however, the global war on terrorism has been a bureaucratic bonanza for Western and many African governments alike, while progress in containing the problem is questionable.

Radical Islamist elements are growing ever more diffuse and loosely connected even as they adopt and pursue shared objectives. The wealth of natural resources, combined with varying degrees of weak governance, continue to make Africa an attractive zone for terror-related activity. How Africa fits into the global terrorism and counterterrorism equations is consequently becoming more complicated. The unbroken series of bombings across the continent prior to and since 9/11 was apparently insufficient to integrate Africa fully into the global war on terror. The various trails reaching from the London bombings back to Eritrea, Somalia, South Africa, and Zambia should lead African and world leaders to two conclusions: first, that Africa's role in creating opportunities for and countering terrorism urgently needs to be elevated; second, that failure to do so will continue to have tragic consequences far beyond the continent's shores.

What is quite clear, however, is that Africa is a central frontier in the global counterinsurgency intended to cope with the political violence that grips the Islamic world. As the United States and its allies directly attack these problems in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, they must also look to the “soft underbelly” of the greater Middle East and Europe—in Africa. Helping African states to build their own security capacity is a critical but long-term endeavor, one not necessarily accelerated by either occasional joint military training programs or large financial infusions. The immediate threat requires understanding the constantly changing ways in which people and money move through Africa and across the globe. As extremist elements become more creative in generating funds and laundering money, there is an urgent need to develop more sophisticated systems for monitoring and containing the trafficking of false documents, the abuse of trade invoicing, and the forging of alliances of convenience among terrorists and organized crime along new and traditional smuggling routes.

More broadly, the intersection of global asymmetric threats and the concerted efforts of African leaders to own their continent’s uplifting necessitates a new paradigm of engagement in Africa based on shared interests rather than externally defined geopolitical priorities. This is the prerequisite for bringing African states more actively and effectively into the struggle against globalized violent extremism.

Notes

1. Jendayi Frazer, interview by Nikiwe Bikitsha, *AM Live*, SAfm (talk radio in Johannesburg, South Africa), August 10, 2005.
2. Commission for Africa, *Our Common Interest* (Glasgow, Scotland: Commission for Africa, March 2005), available through www.commissionforafrica.org.
3. Cited in Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa* (New York: Random House, 1991), 22.
4. Ken Menkhaus, “Somalia: State Collapse and the Threat of Terrorism” (Adelphi paper 364, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2004).
5. International Crisis Group, “Countering Terrorism in Somalia: Losing Hearts and Minds,” (*Africa Report* no. 95, July 11, 2005).
6. Taba (Oct. 7, 2004); Cairo (April 7 and 30, 2005); and Sharm el-Sheikh (July 25, 2005).
7. Jason Burke, *Al Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 24.
8. Tony Blair, “The Prime Minister’s Statement on the London Explosions,” (statement, Gleneagles, Scotland, July 7, 2005), available at www.number10.gov.uk/output/page7853.asp.
9. Interviews with senior military and intelligence officers at the Department of Defense, August 2005.
10. Interviews with senior military and intelligence officers at the Departments of Defense and State, August 2005.