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Radical Islam in East Africa

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Summary

The most serious threats to the United States and U.S. allies and interests in East Africa are al-Qaeda activities in the region and increasing levels of radicalization among sectors of the East African Muslim population. East Africa has been a sanctuary and base for Islamist terrorist operations since the early 1990s and remains a priority area in al-Qaeda's global strategy. The weakness of African governments and the internal fighting and corruption of these regimes facilitate the ability of terrorists to move, plan, and organize.

Although al-Qaeda represents the primary terrorist threat to U.S. interests in East Africa, it is only one component of a much larger universe of radical Islamist groups and organizations in the region. There are numerous indigenous radical Islamist groups in East Africa with varying degrees of affinity to al-Qaeda's agenda. In addition, missionary groups—many funded by Saudi charities—are actively propagating a radical, fundamentalist, Salafi interpretation of Islam that, while not necessarily violent, function as gateways to terrorism.

Geographic proximity and social, cultural, and religious affinities between East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula make East Africa susceptible to infiltration by radical activists and ideologies from the Middle East. This is not to suggest that East Africa is necessarily fertile soil for radical Islamism. Although Salafism has made inroads among the educated elites, traditional and Sufi practices continue to predominate among the mass of the Muslim population. Despite the effects of such externalities as the proliferation of Gulf charities in the region,

the strength of Islam rooted in local cultures acts to retard the spread of extremist ideas.

The counterterrorism assistance programs that are now being implemented in East Africa, if sustained, could help lay the groundwork for a more robust regime of counterterrorism collaboration in East Africa. Counterterrorism assistance alone, however, is unlikely to provide an effective long-term solution to the challenges of Islamist extremism and terrorism. An effective long-term solution would require attacking the conditions that make the region hospitable to extremist and terrorist elements. A strategic approach would include the following elements:

Strengthen state institutions and civil society. This could be done through programs that augment human capital, improve public administration and the delivery of government services, professionalize (and in some cases decriminalize) the military and police forces, and support the work of benign nongovernmental organizations. (See pp. 8–20.)

Consider making use of the funded Defense Resource Management Studies (DRMS) program funded by the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Program Analysis and Evaluation (OSD/PA&E) in East Africa to help rationalize and strengthen regional countries' military and internal security structures. This program helps partner countries to rationalize their defense resource management systems and decisionmaking process, build the staff skills necessary to implement the project, and begin to analyze the real-life issues confronting them.¹ (See pp. 75–76.)

Take stronger steps to promote a political settlement among Somali factions that permits the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces from Mogadishu. There are two possible negotiating tracks. One is between the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia (TFG) and the Asmara-based opposition. This track may not be feasible because of lack of political will on either side, but an effort should be made to detach the moderate (or less radical) sector of the Asmara group,

¹ Wade Hinkle, "Making America's Security Partners Better Resource Managers," *IDA Research Notes*, 2007.

possibly using the good offices of an Arab League state. The second, and possibly more promising track, would be to promote negotiations between the TFG and the Hawiye Leadership Committee—a non-violent group that claims to speak for Mogadishu’s dominant Hawiye clan. For this approach to work, a government of national reconciliation that includes the major Hawiye sectors that have been left out of the process would have to be forged. Moving the TFG along this path would require pressure on the TFG (and possibly on the TFG’s Ethiopian patrons) by the United States, the European Union, and African partners. (See pp. 63–69.)

Consider using diplomatic recognition of Somaliland as an incentive to keep Somaliland on a democratic track and secure effective cooperation in counterterrorism. Unfortunately, the arrest of the leadership of the opposition Qaran Party by the Rayale administration in July 2007 has set back the democratization process in Somaliland. However, an incentive package linked to political reconciliation and free elections could help bring about a restoration of the democratic process. Elements of such a package could include granting Somaliland the status that Montenegro enjoyed prior to formal independence from Serbia-Montenegro. As part of a package involving steps toward recognition of Somaliland, the United States could explore U.S. Air Force use of the air facility at Berbera to augment U.S. air access in the Horn of Africa–Middle East–Persian Gulf region. (See pp. 10–12.)

Acknowledge that the United States will maintain a military presence in the Horn of Africa for the foreseeable future, and build the appropriate infrastructure to support it. To enhance the effectiveness of the Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTTF-HOA) and preserve the continuity of its interaction with regional militaries, the basing status of the CJTTF-HOA should be changed from expeditionary to permanent. Tours should be changed from unaccompanied and short-term to accompanied and of longer duration. (See pp. 71–72.)

Assist cooperating regional governments in gaining better control of their borders, both land and maritime, through provision of training, platforms, and surveillance systems appropriate to the environment and the regional country’s capabilities. Strengthening border

control is particularly important in the case of friendly countries bordering on southern Somalia, i.e., Ethiopia and Kenya, to prevent the movement of Somalia-based terrorists across their borders. (See pp. 20–21.)

Deter external support of radical groups operating in East Africa. Together with coalition partners, the United States needs to reassess its policy toward Eritrea and develop points of leverage to dissuade the Eritrean government from continuing to support extremists in Somalia and Ethiopia. (See pp. 34, 44–49, and 67–70.)

Reduce the influence of foreign Islamist organizations by identifying mainstream and Sufi Muslim sectors and helping them propagate moderate interpretations of Islam and delegitimize terrorism. Given that Islamist organizations use the provision of social services to advance their agenda, ways should be explored to help moderate Muslim nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) provide social services and therefore reduce the influence of Islamist NGOs. Of course, this assistance should be extended in ways that do not compromise the credibility of the moderate groups. (See pp. 40–44.)

Begin to remove barriers to economic growth. There is general agreement in the policy community on the need to promote economic opportunity, especially for the young, in order to reduce the pool of potential jihadi recruits. However, given the magnitude of the barriers to economic growth in East Africa, it would be more realistic to recommend a process for identifying and beginning to remove or lower these barriers to the extent feasible. The critical requirements are the establishment of a modicum of order and security and predictability in the behavior of governments and their agents, mitigation of corruption (at least in the delivery of international assistance), reduction of trade barriers, debt relief where appropriate, and promotion of entrepreneurship with a focus on small-sized enterprises.

The overall aim should be to build sustained national resilience that is intolerant of terrorists and extremists and effective against them. This can only occur if hard security initiatives are linked with a broader array of policies designed to promote political, social, and economic stability. Without such a two-track approach, there is little chance that counterterrorist modalities will take root. (See pp. 77–78.)