



Commentary

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In many African countries, jihadists are making gains. As part of our series [The Legacy of 9/11 and the “War on Terror”](#), Comfort Ero and Murithi Mutiga say options for stemming the tide should include opening lines of communication to those militants pursuing local goals.

Africa: Escaping 9/11’s Long Shadow

SINCE MID-JULY, when the Taliban march toward the Afghan capital accelerated at an astonishing pace, the Somalia-based jihadist group Al-Shabaab’s media channels have [covered little else](#). Not without reason. One of al-Qaeda’s wealthiest and most tenacious affiliates, Al-Shabaab doubtless hopes that it, too, can outwait the large international troop deployment that props up Somalia’s government and one day capture power throughout the country. Al-Shabaab’s enduring influence – it retains a capacity to levy taxes essentially unchallenged in [as much as 80 per cent](#) of the country – sums up a key lesson from two decades of the U.S.-led “war on terror” in Africa: the investment in military efforts to contain jihadism, in places where governments enjoy dismal levels of public credibility, and in situations where elites in distant capitals deliver few services to the people, has hardly helped row back the threat of jihadist militancy. That threat remains as acute as at any period in the last twenty years.

There is little question that the assaults in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 and the period of high-octane interventionism that followed continue to cast a long

shadow on many parts of the continent. Set back on its heels (for now) in the Levant, the Islamic State (ISIS) is claiming the support of a string of affiliates in Africa, even if the link rarely extends to operational collaboration. Al-Qaeda, too, has lost ground in the Middle East but retains strong affiliates on the continent. In parts of the Lake Chad basin, the Sahel and [Somalia](#), militant groups not only occupy territory but also offer services – particularly in the administration of a rough but enforced form of justice – filling a yawning governance vacuum left by indifferent ruling elites. In Mozambique, a new, bloody movement rooted in local grievances but including elements claiming wider jihadist aspirations has in recent months intensified its attacks, wreaking havoc in the country’s north and drawing recruits from up and down the Swahili coast.

It would be a mistake, of course, to see the growing web of jihadism on the continent as flowing solely from Washington’s wide-reaching post-9/11 “war on terror”. The seeds of militancy had long existed in many parts of Africa. For example, in the 1980s, East African youth travelled to the mountains of Afghanistan to join the anti-Soviet resistance, returning to



A Nigerian soldier patrols on the outskirts of the town of Damask in North East Nigeria on 25 April 2017. Florian PLAUCHEUR / AFP

places such as Somalia and Sudan with the aspiration – and the contacts – to set up local militant cells. Al-Qaeda staged its first mass-casualty suicide bombings in Africa 23 years ago in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. That assault was partly planned in Sudan, where al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden had moved with a band of key associates in 1992 after leaving Afghanistan (he subsequently returned when the Taliban took over a few years later).

Nor did the grievances that militants exploit emanate solely from the clumsy fashion in which authorities – some eager to align with the U.S. and its allies to benefit from a flood of military aid Washington was offering – prosecuted their own efforts to rein in Islamism. Those grievances tend to be longstanding, often related to access to land, resources, identity and marginalisation, as well as poor governance writ large.

Rather, 9/11 allowed for the appropriation of new language and ideological discourse to hook the festering anger of communities

discontented with local governing arrangements and inflamed by the uncaring attitude of authorities. Militants deftly harnessed these grievances to draw recruits. They appropriated the “us versus them” rhetoric to their advantage and ignited an interconnected jihadist movement united by shared objectives. Paths to militancy are complex and varied, as Crisis Group has long argued, and do not correspond to grievances alone. But perceptions of marginalisation offered fodder that entrepreneurs as varied as Hamadou Koufa in Mali, Mohammed Yusuf in Nigeria and Aboud Rogo in Kenya could exploit, targeting a tiny yet potent fringe within the Muslim community and guiding them onto the path of militancy. Their core message was that jihadism was the best way to change illegitimate and corrupt local governance systems and that these local wars were part of a larger, just cause. The 9/11 attacks provided inspiration to these actors, with figures such as Yusuf, who was based at the time in the northern Nigerian town of Maiduguri and went

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on to found Boko Haram, attracting large new audiences.

Almost without exception, Africa’s leaders reacted to the jihadist threat with a heavy hand and the impact has been nothing short of disastrous. In many cases, a military response inevitably has to be part of the wider strategy to reverse militants’ gains. In Somalia and parts of the Sahel, for example, jihadists have gained substantial strength over the years and aspire to topple state institutions and impose their rule upon all of society. Elsewhere, particularly outside war zones, better policing, intelligence gathering and working with communities would yield far better results.

The tendency of authorities to turn to aggressive, often military responses to security challenges has done little to improve people’s faith in their governments, and it is certainly not making Islamist militancy less attractive to marginalised communities. Moreover, the military response to jihadism has contributed to its spread. Local grievances have become more global, interconnected and therefore tougher to address. In Nigeria, for example, authorities responded to Boko Haram by killing its leader and detaining thousands of suspected Islamists in inhumane conditions at the Giwa barracks in Maiduguri, further stoking the embers of discontent. Extrajudicial killings, beatings, burning of homes, extortion and widespread corruption by the security forces **ultimately resulted** in greater support for Boko Haram. Further, indiscriminate crackdowns aimed at ethnic groups such as the Fulani in the Sahel and Kanuri in Lake Chad that were perceived as supplying large numbers of recruits to militant organisations widened fissures between those groups and authorities to the militants’ benefit.

Aggressive action by the security forces has loosened social bonds in parts of East Africa,

including Tanzania where inter-religious ties were historically strong. The country’s President John Pombe Magufuli, in office from 2015 until his death in March 2021, ordered a brutal crackdown on suspected Islamists, inadvertently sending Tanzanian youth into the Mozambican insurgency’s arms – and **reportedly** feeding militancy in semi-autonomous Zanzibar, where many chafe at control by an unaccountable centre. In Kenya, authorities responded to Al-Shabaab’s deadly 2013 assault on the Westgate mall in Nairobi by rounding up thousands of Muslims and Somali youth and repeatedly threatening to shut down refugee camps that host families fleeing hunger and conflict in Somalia. Kampala similarly engaged in **blanket repression** of local Muslims following a wave of mysterious killings of prominent figures in the security forces.

Highly securitised responses elsewhere fared little better. In northern Mali, creeping militarisation began in the early 2000s at a time when foreign and regional governments were **concerned** that the desert had become a vast space that groups such as the Algerian Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat, the precursor to al-Qaeda’s Maghreb chapter, were exploiting to establish a foothold. The tipping point in the Sahel, however, was the UN-mandated intervention that led to Muammar Qadhafi’s ouster and killing in 2011. A flow of weapons across the region amid chaos in Libya contributed to growing ferment. In northern Mali, Tuareg rebels **entered an alliance** with Islamists before the latter outflanked the separatist rebels, took over most of northern Mali and launched an advance south to the capital Bamako. Former colonial power France intervened and quickly ousted the militants from towns, but they regrouped and have subsequently defied French and regional governments’ efforts to beat back their insurgency. The crisis in Mali and elsewhere in the Sahel ushered in a period when **a military-heavy approach** became the main tool policymakers reached for to root out Islamist militancy, even amid **widespread allegations** of security force abuses against civilians.

Entrenching Autocracy

The key effect of this period of increased militarisation was that it served as a gift to Africa's strongmen and, in some ways, drew the curtains on a period from the early 1990s when many single-party rulers had come under intense Western pressure to democratise. This development was perverse: experience over the last two decades has shown that unaccountable elites distrusted by local populations create conditions that militants can readily exploit.

Western support for strongmen who promised a degree of stability and to keep militants at bay did not come immediately on the heels of the al-Qaeda attacks in New York and Washington. It is all too easy to forget, given recent events, that President George W. Bush was **initially applauded** domestically for his ambition in leading a large international coalition in invading and trying to remake Afghanistan, an intervention that seemed of a piece with his later assessment that the U.S. needed to encourage democratic politics in the Middle East and beyond. The logic at the time was that unaccountable governance had nurtured dictatorships out of tune with the opinions of frustrated populations and by consequence helped pave the way to 9/11. "The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands", President Bush declared in his **2005 inaugural address**. "The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world".

That approach had significant reverberations on the African continent at first, as Washington continued its post-Cold War push for electoral democracy. One of the more prominent examples of the early post-9/11 Western pressure for more open politics came in Ethiopia, where the U.S. and European Union (EU) **pushed** their regional ally Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's administration harder than it had historically come to expect, demanding a free election. The vote in 2005 was

accompanied by an unprecedented amount of public debate and political space for the opposition. The opposition performed far better than authorities had anticipated – opposition leaders said they in fact won and rejected official results declaring the incumbent had prevailed. Authorities responded to opposition protests in brutal fashion, killing nearly 200 and detaining 60,000. That harsh crackdown threatened to upend ties between the U.S. and the EU, on one hand, and Addis Ababa on the other.

Another authoritarian leader who came under intense **Western pressure to reform** post-9/11 was Sudan's Omar al-Bashir, bin Laden's former backer who was also facing scrutiny due to atrocities by his security forces in Darfur. Confronted by a hostile Washington (particularly following Saddam Hussein's December 2003 ouster), Bashir calculated that he needed to change tack to survive, ordering his intelligence services to step up cooperation with the U.S. and acceding, very reluctantly, to the 2005 charter that eventually triggered South Sudan's secession.

This brief pro-democratic moment did not last, however. The U.S. and key European allies soon shifted gears, adopting what they viewed as the easier route of offering military aid and tacit political support to leaders who held themselves out as well placed to combat jihadist militancy. In Somalia, the U.S. empowered discredited local warlords in an attempt to weaken the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), a group of clerics who had restored a semblance of order and stability in Mogadishu from 2005 to 2006 after years of civil war. Although they were focused on local goals, the U.S. perceived them as a threat. On Boxing Day in 2006, **with U.S. air support**, Ethiopia's Meles Zenawi dispatched up to 10,000 troops to Somalia to combat Al-Shabaab, the ICU's youth wing. Meles labelled the group "Africa's Taliban". The intervention eased Western criticism of Meles' domestic

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conduct following the 2005 crisis while at the same time bolstering Al-Shabaab’s legitimacy in Somalia. Uganda’s President Yoweri Museveni likewise sent troops to battle Al-Shabaab in Somalia in 2011. Chad’s then president, Idriss Déby, was the poster boy of this emerging bargain, explicitly positioning himself as a guarantor of peace not just in N’Djamena but beyond – despite the fact that, as Crisis Group highlighted, the country’s primary malaise was poor domestic governance.

Many other rulers openly characterised themselves as “wartime” leaders purportedly stemming a tide of militancy. Guinean authorities routinely branded the opposition fighting the regime’s authoritarian manoeuvres as “terrorists”. In a 2014 speech at Harvard University, Niger’s President Mahamadou Issoufou said his country was facing a clear dilemma between “security and liberties” and had chosen the former. In Eritrea, the long-serving autocrat Isaias Afwerki did not wait long to exploit the attacks in the U.S., rounding up most of his potential challengers in the days following 9/11 at a time when the world’s attention was focused elsewhere. Most of them have not been seen since.

Numerous countries on the continent have come to use the terrorist threat as cover to pass and enforce legislation curtailing the activities of civil society. In 2016, as the Anglophone crisis took hold, Cameroon turned to its controversial 2014 anti-terror law to suppress criticism and freedom of expression, arbitrarily arresting journalists, civil society members and peaceful protesters. Today, Tanzania’s main opposition leader Freeman Mbowe languishes in a Dar es Salaam jail after he was detained on 21 July and later charged with “terrorism financing and terrorism conspiracy”.

There are, of course, some caveats. In most cases, the turn to authoritarianism owes more to domestic dynamics than to conditions on the international scene post-9/11. Many countries on the continent had a long history of one-party rule. The rise of China and its growing engagement on the continent from the turn of the millennium further boosted some of these strongmen. Much as Russia had done during the Cold War, an emergent China gave autocrats a choice of partner beyond the West, which meant that they were not as beholden to whatever Western pressure there was – albeit often tempered by higher priorities – to democratise. Also, some countries such as Ethiopia in Somalia and Chad in the Lake Chad basin engaged partly in defence of national interests and not solely in service of the U.S.-led global war on terror. A few countries led by strongmen in the years immediately after 9/11, again including Ethiopia and Uganda, successfully deployed securitised strategies to quell militancy at home, albeit often with a high human toll.

These successes were exceptions to the rule, however. Securitised strategies mostly meant that opportunities and incentives for negotiations with more pragmatic elements within Islamist movements were lost, while blanket crackdowns involved serious human rights abuses that further alienated communities and (often unemployed) youth from the state. Moreover, these campaigns did nothing to address the adverse structural and livelihood conditions that the jihadists’ propaganda exploited in recruiting members and shoring up support. The focus in some places was instead on building up military capacity without investing in rule of law institutions – all the while centralising decision-making in capitals rather than empowering local officials who might be

better poised to see and address communities' needs. Perhaps most importantly, political elites invested too little attention, money and

political capital in trying to mitigate the **conditions** that drive militancy.

Changing Tack

Twenty years after the 9/11 attacks, how can Africa ensure that the next two decades look better than the preceding ones? This challenge defies easy solutions, and responses will inevitably need to be tailored to local circumstances. In a range of publications, Crisis Group has over the past two decades offered extensive analysis of the rising tide of jihadist violence on the continent and beyond, notably in our landmark 2016 paper chronicling the rise of ISIS and al-Qaeda. During this time, we have advanced a suite of recommendations for rowing back militancy, many of which retain relevance today.

A first key step should be to disaggregate rather than conflate the many armed movements that have sprung up in the name of Islam so as to pursue more sophisticated responses beyond the resort to violence. Too often, authorities have tended to view militant organisations in a binary fashion, casting the effort to tackle them as a good versus evil endeavour. In fact, many of these groups contain multiple strands of thought, and recruits join them for a variety of reasons. Some who flocked to Boko Haram and its splinter Islamic State in West Africa Province, for example, did not necessarily agree with the principal goal of waging jihad. Many simply wanted better lives for themselves and their communities; some wanted revenge for abuses perpetrated by the region's militaries; and many were promised money and better livelihoods. Others still joined because of the excitement, social status and **marriage prospects** that identification with these groups offers. Better understanding these movements could open the door to dialogue with elements that might be amenable to off-ramps such as amnesties and, sometimes, political inclusion.

Secondly, while there is no question that security operations remain vital for countering militants almost everywhere they operate, these should be accompanied by a political effort to identify and engage with groups, notably at a local level in countries such as Mali. Some groups might be willing to renounce violence in exchange for reforms or incentives such as joining the security forces or being subsumed into local governance. Such measures would open up space for locals to return to their homes and rebuild livelihoods. The exclusion of any possibility of engagement only reinforces the most radical militant voices. Outside actors such as France in Mali should resist the urge to oppose efforts by national authorities to engage with militants.

Thirdly, timing is critical. Al-Shabaab in Somalia, certainly in its earlier years, was divided between, on one hand, elements that pursued pan-Somali goals with the aim of ruling Somalia under Islamic law and, on the other, a global jihadist core. Pulling away the more locally focused element early on might have been a worthwhile goal, as Crisis Group advocated in 2010. It is still not too late to pursue engagement with the group's leadership, although the task will be more formidable now. In Nigeria, too, Boko Haram's founder Mohammed Yusuf had goals that might have been accommodated, but his **extrajudicial killing** at police headquarters in Maiduguri hours after his July 2009 arrest and his subsequent replacement by the more hardline Abubakar Shekau rendered the task of engagement more difficult.

Fourthly, homegrown solutions, including decentralisation of power and resources, should more frequently be a more prominent

part of the response. Nigerian authorities, long committed to genuine decentralisation, have adopted this strategy with some success, including deploying resources to negotiate space with smugglers and traffickers, although the country **still grapples** with a serious Islamist threat and the grey economy has led to more corruption and mis-governance. Crisis Group reporting has also found that, after the failure of initial, highly securitised efforts to combat militancy, Kenyan authorities fashioned an effective partnership with locally elected leaders of sub-national units, religious leaders and civil society, an approach that has been credited with curtailing the attacks on the Kenyan coast that had threatened to upend the vitally important local tourism industry and to sow dangerous inter-religious tensions.

Fifthly, reforming unaccountable states that offer few services to their citizens, a formidably difficult but still necessary task, is another area that requires investment of attention and resources. In many areas, as outlined, militants exploited ungoverned spaces and the absence of service provision by authorities to embed themselves in societies alienated from the state. A perverse effect of the overwhelming focus by Western partners on pouring money and resources into coffers controlled by authorities that styled themselves as reliable counter-terrorism allies post-9/11 was to upend a hierarchy of priorities that in places such as the Sahel previously focused on alleviating poverty and hunger. Moreover, military aid created unprecedented opportunities for corruption, as the multi-million dollar Niger defence ministry scandal demonstrates. Far from strengthening governance and the social contract between governments and their people, the amount and types of aid that flowed into the Sahel arguably weakened it. Defeating Islamist militancy

has been at the heart of the authorities' priorities for the last two decades. A rebalancing is needed to ally efforts to crush militancy with measures to tackle low state capacity to deliver services.

Also, professionalising the security sector is a key priority. Systemic corruption, for example, has hollowed out some of Africa's armies and police forces. Training support by Western and other partners in countries such as Mozambique and **Nigeria** where militants have painfully exposed the shortcomings of national militaries, is necessary alongside support for efforts at comprehensive reform and improvements in governance, rule of law and accountability. Furthermore, improved regional coordination is critical. Sharing intelligence among states and implementing region-wide strategies to keep pace with fluid and adaptable militants would be two other important steps.

At the same time, Western actors should resist the temptation to provide uncritical support to authoritarians. Often, Western governments have no alternative but to work with autocratic leaders. Still, they should be more judicious in their engagement and try to ensure that their aid does not allow authoritarians to shore up their positions, repress their rivals and limit the space for civil society.

The long "global war on terror" has largely failed on the continent, in that there are many more jihadist groups and followers of these movements today than at any point in history. It is essential to draw lessons from what went wrong to avoid another bleak two decades ahead. **Mozambique**, which is battling the newest insurrection of this type, and other states such as Mali and Somalia where militants are only kept at bay by unsustainable foreign military deployments, would be good places to start applying these lessons.



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