The Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence
Journal of Terrorism Research

Opinion Pieces

Who Is to Teach "These Guys" to "Shoot Less?"

by Kacper Rekawek

While conducting research on counter-terrorism (CT) systems of the Central and Eastern European Member States of the European Union, a unique perspective on the European involvement in countering terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa was offered to the author by a Czech defence ministry official. In his view, the fact that his country made a decision to contribute "boots on the ground" to the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) was astonishing, to say the least: "Things like Mali, you sometimes wonder how these thing happen, even if you are part of them (Havranek 2013)." Thus a decision to participate in this latest CT motivated (building a Malian military capable of taking on the jihadists of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, AQIM) EU venture in Africa seems not to have been preceded by a careful analysis and weighting of the options on behalf of his country. In fact, it seemed like a knee jerk reaction to a call for troops from France and subsequently from Brussels. In the end, we might even speculate if, in this very case, the Czech Republic duly settled on a number of troops to be sent to Mali (very low – in dozens) and comfortably ticked off the box on its involvement in yet another Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) military mission in Africa, and its contribution to external aspects of combating terrorism on EU level.

One is bound, however, to ask whether such CT "assistance" will be of any use to our African partners. Military training missions seem a one size fits all type of a solution to numerous African problems, including those related to the issue of CT. Somalia, with AMISOM African troops fighting "terrorists" in the country, and EUTM Somalia based in Uganda, provides a perfect example, a seeming role model for Mali in which MINUSMA would do the fighting with AQIM and its affiliates, and the Bamako based EUTM would concentrate on training. Unfortunately, European and African perceptions of what the newly trained African troops would focus on in the future differ sharply, and it is more than possible that our preference for them to concentrate on combatting either Al-Shabab in Somalia or AQIM in Mali will be lost on the Somali and Malian governments who might need their reconstituted militaries to fight a different set of internal (the non-Islamist Tuareg in Mali) or external (Kenyan military occupying the Southern part of Somalia?) enemies. In such conditions, it would be beneficial to all parties concerned to speculate about other forms of purely CT oriented assistance which are within the European reach but may not have been seriously assessed so far due to our inability and also unwillingness to correctly diagnose the African needs.

In theory, parts of Africa seem to be turning into what *The Economist* dubbed "Afrighanistan", i.e. next battleground with the phenomenon of global, jihadist terrorism (*The Economist*, 2013). Allegedly, a terrorist "arc", stretching from Maghreb, through Mali and Nigeria into the Eastern part of the continent, is being formed in Africa. It is as if all the jihadist forces of the world converged onto some of the weakest states in the world and made the most of their inability to counter terrorism in any meaningful way. This narrative, albeit more than popular in the media, misses a couple of rather key issues which should inform our perception

of the terrorist threat to Africa. The Northern African Arab states, Nigeria, Kenya and Mali are not exactly the weakest links in the African order of battle. Kenya and Nigeria are dubbed future economic and political leaders of the continent, some of the North African Mediterranean states have been undergoing rapid political transitions which should enable them to combat threats like terrorism much more effectively, and Mali, wrongly regarded as the model African democracy, is far from a failed state akin to the Central African Republic. On the other hand, their terrorist enemies have relatively low ability to communicate, co-operate and co-ordinate with each other on a continental basis, and often focus more on petty domestic or regional agendas (see: Nigeria's Boko Haram unwillingness to internationalize its insurgency, internecine feuding in both AQIM and Al-Shabab) (Cristiani and Rekawek, 2013), far removed from the banner of global jihad.

At the same time, some of the aforementioned strengths of the African states with terrorist problems are often undermined by their lack of expertise on conducting and implementing CT policies. This phenomenon was presciently captured by another of my interviewees for the research on CT systems in Central and Eastern Europe, commander of the main Polish SWAT police unit: "These guys [Africans] – they shoot a lot and yes, sometimes they even hit their targets (Stepinski 2013)." In short, the African CT operations often make things worse and only strengthen or fuel terrorist violence in a given country (see: Nigeria's 2009 crackdown on Boko Haram (*International Crisis Group*, 2010)or the 2013 botched siege of the Westgate mall in Nairobi, Kenya (Angira, 2013). Thus, it could be useful to ask whether the European or also U.S. assistance, seemingly aimed at countering terrorism, actually misses its mark and does nothing to improve the situation on the ground.

The CT problem in Africa lies not in the question of standing up military units or equipping them to Western standards using donor money so that they can conduct spectacular operations. The issue at stake is the broader security sector reform (SSR) which will actually: prevent the African CT operators from "shooting a lot, " make sure that the next time another Westgate happens no local police and military will not spend hours arguing who should take the lead in rescuing hostages, introduce clear cut chains of authority in command at both strategic and operational levels of CT, and acquaint the relevant personnel with the issue of the need to uphold human rights standards while conducting operations. All of this should not be seen as an attempt to disregard the need for the Europeans or Americans to assist in the reform of the local militaries which are chronically underfunded, badly trained and un-deployable. Focusing on them, however, will only give us a false sense that we are addressing the issue of "Afrighanistan."

The key question in relation to teaching "these guys" to "shoot less" is deciding on who should play the leading role in the process of standing up the African CT capabilities. France, the old colonial power in Mali, seems like an obvious candidate, so do other Western European states with far reaching experiences of combating terrorism both domestically and externally. At the same time, voices in Brussels, e.g. amongst the personnel of the EU's Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, profess surprise at the reluctance of the "new" Member States to share their SSR experiences with the likes of the democratizing countries of the Southern Mediterranean (Bostyn 2013). In their view, the "new Europeans," with their experiences of transition and learning from the experiences of their Western European neighbours, could be interesting interlocutors for at least some of the Africans who might be distrustful of the old colonial powers. Interestingly enough, some of the Central and Eastern Europeans are already involved in security outreach activities to non-EU countries, e.g. Polish SWAT units mentor their Ukrainian counterparts (Stepinski 2013) and Slovenia and Hungary have traditionally been involved in SSR in the Western Balkans (Slapnicar 2013). In theory, such an outreach could now also be extended to other parts of the world and help Africa address the issue of "shooting a lot."

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