
TERRORISM IN AFRICA: THE NEXUS OF THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL*

Tatyana S. Denisova

Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow

Sergey V. Kostelyanets

*Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University);
Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow*

Terrorism is a complex phenomenon that involves diverse groups with different origins and motives all over the world. Owing, among other things, to processes of globalization, radical Islam has become a common denominator for a myriad of extremist organizations that have come to pursue local agendas under the banners of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and other transnational terrorist networks. In Africa, with its unrivaled ethnic and cultural diversity, peculiar socio-economic and political circumstances, daunting demographic and environmental challenges, the sources of discontent and hatred that breed terrorism are abound; consequently, radicalization is driven predominantly by local factors – injustice, marginalization, underrepresentation, oppression, the lack of economic opportunities, etc. – yet it is the global aspects of the phenomenon that steal the spotlight at the international scene, guide counter-terrorism policymaking, which ultimately leads to the failure to extinguish or even contain the threat of terrorism on the continent. Modern terrorism in Africa forms at the nexus of the global and the local and thus should be confronted and countered as a ‘glocal’ phenomenon, the responsibility for which lies both with the host nation and world powers, and the eradication of which requires addressing inequalities and injustices just as much as strengthening counter-terrorism capacity.

Keywords: *terrorism, Islamism, Africa, globalization, radicalization, counter-terrorism policy.*

1. Introduction

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon in Africa. However, until relatively recently, terrorist attacks by non-state actors were overshadowed by acts of state terror by African regimes – genocides, ethnic cleansings, mass rapes and other crimes against humanity, mostly committed amid armed conflicts. Indeed, the attention of the world community to Africa in the context of the struggle against terrorism was attracted not by these cases of domestic (sub-state) terrorism, which were far more lethal and resulted in nearly a million casualties (Elu and Price 2015: 724), but by the spread of international terrorism on the continent, whose impact has been substantially smaller.¹

*Journal of Globalization Studies, Vol. 13 No. 2, November 2022 169–177
DOI: 10.30884/jogs/2022.02.11*

Arguably, international non-state terrorism spread to Africa in the aftermath of the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989), in which mercenaries from Arab countries, including Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, and other states in Africa, fought on the side of the Afghan Mujahideen against the USSR. After the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, many North African mercenaries returned to the African continent and brought with them ideas of radical fundamentalism. Their repatriation led to a number of disastrous consequences, including, as South African researcher Jakkie Cilliers rightly pointed out, the civil war between the government and Islamists in Algeria (1991–2002) (Cilliers 2003: 94). There had been, however, isolated incidents of international terrorism in Africa even prior to that, such as the 1980 bombing of the Jewish-owned Norfolk hotel in Nairobi by sympathizers of the Palestine Liberation Organization (Mogire and Mkutu 2011: 474).

Until the twenty-first century, the proliferation of armed insurgencies in Africa did not lead to widespread terrorism, at least not in Sub-Saharan Africa. The present century has seen the growing footprint of international terrorist organizations, primarily al-Qaeda² and the Islamic State (ISIS),² which sought to include even most remote areas of Africa in their zones of influence. In fact, in recent years the loci of global terrorist activity have to a certain extent shifted from the Middle East, South Central Asia and North Caucasus to Africa, chiefly to the northern regions of the continent, the Sahelian region, and the Lake Chad Basin.

Significantly, the rationale, goals and methods of global terrorists merged in Africa with local root causes and motives (such as social grievances and resentment) (Okumu and Botha 2007: 24), giving rise to what we may call the nexus of the local and the global, *i.e.*, of domestic and international causes, actors and factors of terrorism. Accordingly, Africa's extremist groups, which are intrinsically homegrown, begin to establish links with international terrorist networks as they mature, and eventually may integrate into these global networks and adopt their 'brand'. Domestic terrorists are induced to globalize in order to be able to exploit natural resources and generate income from the sale of minerals in the world markets, to extend their territorial or economic control beyond the borders of a single country, or to receive donations from diasporas, *etc.* The process wherein the exchange of manpower, funding, and training between global and local terrorist actors develops has also been called the 'glocalization' of terrorism (Adeyemi 2013). Indeed, in literature it has been aptly argued that this synergy has been made possible by advancements in transportation and ICT (Solomon 2020: 106).

2. Between the Local and the Global: Searching for Sources of Terrorism

The nexus of local and global aspects of terrorism became a cross-cutting theme of the online international conference 'New Frontiers of Terrorism in Africa', which was organized jointly by the Institute for African Studies (IAS) of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Moscow, Russia), University of the Free State (UFS) (Bloemfontein, South Africa) and University of Haifa (UoH) (Haifa, Israel). The conference, which took place on 17 March 2021, gathered participants from the aforementioned three organizations, as well as representatives of the South African Military Academy (SAMA) (Saldanha, South Africa) and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) (Pretoria, Africa), who shared their views on the interconnection of global and local factors of the spread of terrorism in Africa and on the adaptation of ideas and tactics of global extremist movements with

account of political and socio-economic peculiarities of African countries. In addition, speakers discussed terrorist strategies and international responses to terrorism on the continent.

In her welcome remarks, the Director of the IAS, Prof. Irina Abramova drew attention to the fact that the fundamental cause of Africa's allure to international terrorists is the continent's growing economic and political importance on the world stage. Despite the uncertainties brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, Africa's future as a new centre of global development seems predetermined. Following her address, Russia's Ambassador to South Africa Ilya Rogachev highlighted the negative socio-economic consequences of terrorism in Africa and also pointed to 'geopolitical engineering' by the West in the Middle East and North Africa as a possible trigger of the escalation of the terrorist threat. Furthermore, Ambassador Rogachev suggested that Africa's terrorist groups remain undefeated because global and regional powers do not cooperate in the war on terror but rather continue to pursue their own interests. The last opening remarks were given by Dr. Haim Koren, a former Israeli Ambassador to Egypt and South Sudan, who emphasized the complex nature of the phenomenon of terrorism, which has to be investigated not only on local, regional and global levels, but also taking into account history, religion, ideology, ethnology and climatic conditions in affected African societies.

The conference included three sessions, entitled 'From Ocean to Ocean: Africa's Arch of Instability', 'The Cone of Africa: Challenges of Counterterrorism?', and 'Terrorist Strategies and International Responses'. The topic of the first session, chaired by Dr. Sergey Kostelyanets (IAS), stressed the geographic continuity of terrorism-prone regions in Africa, which is another consequence of the porosity of borders that has been facilitating drug trafficking, arms smuggling and other illicit activities ever since the establishment of the continent's modern borders.

The presentation by Dr. Natalia Zherlitsina (IAS) focused on Morocco's responses to terrorist attacks in the kingdom, in particular, the political and religious reforms that aimed at undermining the support base of extremists. The concept of 'spiritual security', which became the cornerstone of Morocco's antiterrorism policy, emphasized the need to impose strict control over the religious sphere through the creation of dedicated government institutions, which would, among other things, scrutinize and avert destructive foreign influences, and the bureaucratization of socioreligious matters. Particular attention was paid to the introduction of standardized religious education programs that placed a greater emphasis on civil values than on Islam. In addition, through the reform of higher Islamic education, the Moroccan government managed to co-opt religious elites and increase their loyalty to the civilian authorities. Moreover, Morocco has been working to spread its approach to the religious sphere and 'spiritual security' and its preference of the more moderate Maliki school of Muslim law to neighboring countries, for example, Mali. Largely owing to its well-honed antiterrorism strategy, Morocco remains one of the few Muslim countries where terrorism has failed to put down deep roots, making it an important example for other African states.

Prof. Hussein Solomon (UFS) examined internal and external drivers of terrorism in the Sahel, where militant violence has provoked a major humanitarian crisis. The failure of foreign militaries – French and American – was attributed to their ignorance of the African context, history and national armed forces. The region's militants may be

affiliated with global jihadist networks, but first and foremost they are Africans who are frustrated and dissatisfied with the political, economic and social status quo in their home countries, some of which have centuries-long history of politico-religious conflicts. At the same time, African regimes, which are well aware of the facts on the ground, to their own ends encourage the prolonged Western misdiagnosis of insurgents in the Sahel as the bannermen of the global jihad. Nevertheless, African governments often make the mistake of arming local militias to resist Islamists, which results in the erosion of state monopoly on violence, however weak, and greater destabilization.

Dr. Tatyana Denisova (IAS) offered an analysis of radicalization trends in Cameroon, where Muslims constitute just 26 per cent of the population, but where they form majority in parts of the country and also demonstrate faster demographic growth. Wahhabism, the dissemination of which is funded by Gulf monarchies, for years has been supplanting more moderate traditional Sufi Islam. In particular, Wahhabi schools offer free education, and Wahhabi organizations render social support in time of economic crises, making their doctrine ever more popular with Cameroonians. In response to intensifying activities of Boko Haram militants in Cameroon's border regions, the government began the persecution of presumably Wahhabi imams and their local supporters, which further angered and radicalized Cameroon's Muslims. While the authorities have so far been able to contain Islamist activities, demographic and sectarian trends indicate a high likelihood of destabilization in absence of effective political and socioeconomic reforms in the country whose government continues to overlook domestic root causes of radicalization.

Dr Anneli Botha (UFS) concluded the first session with an evaluation of terrorism tendencies in East Africa and practical recommendations for the region's national security forces. It was demonstrated that not only terrorist attacks in this part of the continent are on the rise, but terrorist tactics are changing, mostly under the influence of the global networks of al-Qaeda and ISIS, which compels law enforcement and intelligence agencies to adapt their responses to new circumstances accordingly and also actively involve other government agencies to assist them with preventing violent extremism.

The second session, chaired by Dr. Glen Segell (UoH), dealt with terrorism in Southern Africa. The panel was inaugurated by Prof. Vladimir Shubin, who discussed the strategies of armed liberation struggle in South Africa. It was argued that the African National Congress (ANC) never resorted to terrorism, but chose sabotage as its main form of violence directed against the apartheid regime. In the same vein, Nelson Mandela never was a terrorist, even though he was widely branded as such by the regime's sympathizers. In fact, it was Soviet assistance that made it possible for ANC and a number of other liberation movements to avoid the use of terrorist methods.

Prof. Theo Neethling (UFS) spoke about the peculiarities of extremism in Mozambique. The insurgency in Northern Mozambique may be characterized by the following features: it is the first manifestation of jihadist militancy in Southern Africa; the region was set to see large-scale investment in gas exploration, which could have revitalized the Mozambican economy, but terrorist activities have derailed plans of most investors; Mozambican security forces proved unable to counter the Islamists; and finally, the area has become a heroin trafficking hub, which facilitates the spread of lawlessness and radicalism. All things considered, Islamists have firmly established themselves in Northern Mozambique, capitalizing on local grievances and illicit income opportunities

and taking advantage of international linkages, and are likely to attempt to resurrect the Islamic State in this part of Africa.

Willem Els (UFS/ISS) continued the discussion of insurgency in Mozambique, placing his focus on the mismanagement of natural resources in the country. The region of Cabo Delgado in Northern Mozambique, which has become the primary breeding ground of terrorism in Southern Africa, has historically suffered of poverty and illiteracy. In fact, the tensions between local residents and the central government long preceded the discovery of rubies and natural gas in the area. Yet, the discovery of gemstones, for instance, exacerbated the conflict: instead of sharing the proceeds with the region's population, the corrupt Mozambican officials chose to drive local people off their land that was found to contain precious gems and to hand over the license to a foreign company – Gemfields. The process was accompanied with extreme violence and destruction of property. While some of the victims later received compensations from Gemfields, they forfeited their land and could not engage in artisanal mining of rubies. It seems now likely that many of them joined the Islamists as a result. Accordingly, the population has lost any trust in the central government and its regional representatives and does not consider the development of gas projects to be in their interest. The government in Maputo is seen by locals as the exploiter of the region's natural riches that offers little in return in terms of public services and social measures. Consequently, a lasting resolution of the armed conflict would have to involve a totally new approach to the distribution of national wealth and political power, a war on corruption and nepotism, and the introduction of principles of good governance and transparency that could help regain the trust of the population and help remedy injustice.

Prof. Abel Esterhuysen (SAMA) addressed the challenge of dealing with the threat of terrorism in the Republic of South Africa (RSA). On the one hand, the notion of terrorism is still very much viewed in the country through the lens of the attempts by the apartheid regime to brand ANC freedom fighters as terrorists. On the other, there is a certain fear among South African elites of terror attacks by the white political right. While global jihadism has already become a serious security problem in Southern Africa, that is in neighboring Mozambique, in the RSA law enforcement and society alike remain largely unprepared for this threat. There are, however, factors that could facilitate the spread of terrorism in Africa's southernmost country. First, there is a certain amount of ambiguity with regard to South Africa's borders: currently they are extremely porous to transboundary crime and illegal migration, but their closure – arguably an insurmountable task in itself – would undermine integration projects in Southern Africa and could disrupt South African businesses. Second, bad governance and poor economic performance in the RSA have led to the emergence of what we may call a 'criminal insurgency', which entails high levels of homicide, rampant corruption and the general lack of order, enabling a favorable environment for Islamists. Third, the low professionalism of security agencies, which is a byproduct of the historical but increasingly politicized ties between ANC politicians and security officials, raises serious doubts about their ability and will to tackle the Islamist threat. Finally, the ANC itself is highly factionalized and ideologically too diverse, which leads to the dysfunction and policy gridlock in government.

3. Terrorist Strategies and International Responses

The third session, chaired by Prof. Hussein Solomon, was devoted to the discussion of *modi operandi* of both terrorist groups and national governments. The opening report by Prof. Leonid Fituni focused on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorist financing. While it may be too early to identify all new terrorist financing risks, the pandemic has clearly created certain enrichment opportunities for armed groups in Africa, including terrorist organizations. In some areas, Islamists have been able to supplant the government as the key provider of public services, thereby forging closer ties with the local population. Militants have also become more involved in criminal activities such as smuggling and drug trafficking. In addition, there have emerged relatively new methods of extracting financial resources, such as setting up non-profit organizations to raise money for COVID-19 relief funds but using the proceeds to finance terrorist activities. The growing importance of Internet communications due to lockdown measures has facilitated the rise in cyber fraud, mostly perpetrated from Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, South Africa, and Senegal. Over the course of the pandemic, remittances from the diaspora have also become a more important source of terrorist financing, but their volume has declined due to the global economic downturn. In order to curb the global threat of terrorism, it is therefore pertinent for national authorities in Africa to enhance their capacity to monitor and regulate intercontinental and intracontinental financial flows.

Dr. Alta Grobbelaar (UFS) brought up the topic of the role of social media in terrorist propaganda and recruitment. Global social media such as Facebook and Twitter offer extremists free and easy access to millions of potential followers and recruits; security features of these websites protect terrorists from hacker attacks; when their accounts are finally blocked, terrorists quickly set up new ones, making censorship highly ineffective. In many African countries, digitalization has accompanied radicalization; social media represent the key source of information and often the only link between citizens and politics. Online representatives of terrorist groups are increasingly not hackers and cyber-criminals but indoctrinated youths who promote jihad and strict observance of Islam in their posts and tweets. The global law enforcement community has accepted the new reality, with more and more countries launching projects to monitor online activity of their citizens. However, the sheer amount of information generated in the Internet has made these efforts only partially effective. It may be thus concluded that repressive measures and censorship should be accompanied with the promotion of counter-narratives in the Internet by local communities and law enforcement agencies with the aim of informing online audiences of deceptions of terrorist propaganda.

Dr. Glen Segell reviewed the history of the evolution of Islam in Africa, which according to him should be divided into four distinct phases – containment, mixing, reform and radicalization. While the first three phases seem to follow a logical evolutionary sequence, the radicalization phase may be described as a revolutionary development. During the containment phase, African leaders would isolate Muslim communities from the rest of their subjects; the stage of mixing referred to the practice of the selective adoption of Islam and its customs by locals, who would then blend them with local traditions; in the third phase, reforms were introduced by African Muslims to cleanse Islam of impurities. The fourth phase of radicalization is considered as a destructive and irrational phenomenon that is rooted in local socio-economic discontent

and political and cultural marginalization but has been triggered by the growing global influences of Salafism and jihadism, which were imported relatively recently but quickly eclipsed traditional schools of Islam, and which justified the use of violence against non-believers and apostates.

Dr. Sergey Kostelyanets, whose focus was on Russia's counterterrorism and counterinsurgencies strategies for Africa, presented an analysis of key drivers and parameters of Moscow's security cooperation with African countries. Russia has arguably become one of the global leaders and ardent advocates of the war on terrorism, motivated both by domestic security concerns and international ambitions. Moscow's effective campaign against the Islamic State in Syria has impressed many African leaders, who face similar threats at home and who solicited Russian help in fighting extremist groups. Russia's approach, however, mostly entails the use of hard power and emphasizes the need to eradicate global terrorist networks, but does not offer a remedy to local factors of radicalization. In terms of soft power, Moscow promotes the strategy of co-opting religious leaders, but it has only proven practical in nations with limited civic and political space. The disregard of local drivers of the spread of terrorism puts Moscow on the same track with Western powers, which have failed to contain Islamist groupings in the Sahel and elsewhere.

Dr. Moshe Terdiman (UoH) concluded the session with a paper on the environmental drivers of radicalization in Africa. Certain extremist organizations, for instance, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, have developed own green agendas to win hearts and minds of the population that is increasingly suffering from climate change, desertification, and natural disasters. In the Lake Chad Basin, droughts and famines have driven thousands of desperate young people to join Boko Haram militants. In the Sahel, desertification has pushed men and women to enter the ranks of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, and other Sahelian terrorist organizations. Thus, the global environmental change is another major cause of terrorism in Africa on par with political, social, religious and ethnic causes. Simultaneously, Islamist groups have been exploiting natural resources in a predatory manner, leading to deforestation, extinction of species and other calamities, and specifically targeting energy infrastructure, at times causing technological catastrophes, exacerbating the global impacts of climate change with local malpractices and sabotage.

4. Conclusion

The globalization or rather the 'glocalization' of terrorism has drastically changed the nature of the phenomenon; the networked kind of terrorism has become significantly more effective than its predecessors in dealing damage to security forces, spreading the ideology of radical Islam, procuring finances and equipment, and even supplanting the state in the provision of public goods and services. Yet, the key sources of terrorism in Africa are still to be found at the local level, where injustice, marginalization and oppression breed grievances, discontent and hatred; where economic opportunities are often to be found only in the realm of illegal activities; where the boundaries between crime, insurgency and terrorism are blurred and incidental. Just as communist ideology during the Cold War would provide the disadvantaged with a linchpin and bulwark in their struggle for their rights, radical Islam not only promises a new avenue toward

achieving equality and justice in the Muslim world and every Muslim village, but also equips its disciples with necessary ideological, doctrinal and even technical impetuses to work their way toward the goal. Thus, while Africa has also witnessed many Christian terror groups, including such prominent cases as the Anti-balaka in the Central African Republic (Denisova and Kostelyanets 2019: 28) or the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda (Denisova and Kostelyanets 2018), they have never acquired the same appeal and cachet as Islamist movements.

Terrorism, indeed, is a product of a lengthy process of radicalization, wherein a multitude of factors contribute to the ultimate decision to begin or join an armed struggle against the national government, often under the banner of Islam. However, these factors are usually discernible and mitigatable at the local level, but left unattended they snowball into a permanent problem of continental and then global proportions. At the same time, one must acknowledge that Islamic terrorism remains a convenient adversary both for African regimes, which dexterously brand political opponents as terrorists (see, e.g., Vasiliev, Korotayev and Issaev 2019), but rarely are critically threatened by Islamists and easily mobilize broad international and domestic support for counterterrorism actions, and for major world powers, which gain political and economic influence in exchange for their assistance. Therefore, the prospects for eradication or at least containment of terrorism in Africa currently seem dim. There are, nevertheless, encouraging trends, such as deepening continent-wide integration, steady economic growth, and recurrent waves of democratization, which may alleviate some of the local causes of radicalization in Africa and eventually erode the support base of jihadism.

NOTES

* The paper has been prepared with the support of the Russian Science Foundation within the framework of the grant 19-18-00155 'Islamist extremism in the context of international security: threats to Russia and the possibility of countering'.

¹ Terrorism fatalities (GTD, 2018). *Our World in Data*. URL: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/fatalities-from-terrorism?tab=table&time=2017>.

² This organization is banned in the Russian Federation.

REFERENCES

- Adeyemi, O. B. 2013. Glocalization of Terrorism in West Africa. *RIMA Occasional Papers* 1 (4): 1–7.
- Cilliers, J. 2003. Terrorism and Africa. *African Security Studies* 12 (4): 91–103.
- Denisova, T. S., and Kostelyanets, S. V. 2018. Uganda: From the Holy Spirit Movement to the Lord's Resistance Army: Remarks on Christian Terrorism in Africa. *Vostok (Oriens)* 3: 94–104. *Original in Russian* (Денисова, Т. С., Костелянец, С. В. Уганда: от Движения Святого Духа к Армии сопротивления Господа (к вопросу о христианском терроризме в Африке). *Восток (Oriens)* 3: 94–104).
- Denisova, T. S. and Kostelyanets, S. V. 2019. The Central African Republic: Conflict Dynamics. *Aziya i Afrika segodnya* 6: 24–31. *Original in Russian* (Денисова, Т. С., Костелянец, С. В. ЦАР: динамика конфликта. *Азия и Африка сегодня* 6: 24–31).

- Elu, J., and Price, G. 2015. The Causes and Consequences of Terrorism in Africa. In Monga, C. and Lin, J. Y. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Africa and Economics*. Vol. 1. *Context and Concepts* (pp. 724–739). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mogire, E., and Mkutu, A. K. 2011. Counter-Terrorism in Kenya. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 29 (4): 473–491.
- Okumu, W., and Botha, A. (eds.) 2007. *Domestic Terrorism in Africa: Defining, Addressing and Understanding its Impact on Human Security*. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies. URL: <https://media.africaportal.org/documents/TERRORISMREPORT.pdf>.
- Solomon, E. 2020. Globalization of the Radical Islamist Terrorism and the Boko Haram in Nigeria. *Journal of Globalization Studies* 11 (1): 102–116.
- Vasiliev, A. M., Korotayev, A. V., and Issaev, L. M. (eds.). 2019. *Clash for the Middle East: Regional Actors in the Context of the Reconfiguration of the Middle East Conflict*. Moscow: LENAND. Original in Russian (Васильев А. М., Коротаев А. В., Исаев Л. М. (ред.). *Схватка за Ближний Восток: Региональные акторы в условиях реконфигурации ближневосточного конфликта*. М.: Ленанд).