

Countering Terrorism in Africa – Interview with Maxim Worcester

by Dr. Peter Roell

ISPSW: How do you see the terrorist threat in Africa?

MW: The potential problems we are facing are compounded by the sheer size of the continent. If you just take sub Saharan Africa, which is larger than the US, Europe, India and China combined and include 34 of the poorest countries in the world then the problem is daunting.

Much of the subcontinent has a strong, traditional Islamic presence and the mosaic of societal structures is little understood. These factors combine to present a set of challenges for intelligence gathering and long-term policy setting. Add to this the number of failed and failing states in the region, many of which are experiencing civil war or serious unrest and the various agendas which the terrorist organisations are pursuing and you have a highly complex and volatile situation.

Osama bin Laden in a statement in July 2006 clearly singled out Somalia as an important jihadist front of the future and that is clearly the case today in 2008. In spite of the Ethiopian intervention the country is in the grip of Islamic fundamentalists and there is much reason for pessimism.

At the root of the problem is the continued failure of the intelligence community to understand the role of the clan, family and sub-clan structure that govern Somali life. The jihadists understand these structures and know how to mobilise, motivate and use these forces to their advantage, particularly in the urban area of Mogadishu. The Somali government thought it had defeated the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2007 when the fighters melted away into the bush in a classic terrorist move only to reappear once the government let its guard down.

Today anarchy rules the streets of Mogadishu and up to 20.000 people are fleeing the city every month. Due to the violence aid agencies upon whom the refugees depend are leaving the country and of the promised 8000 African Union peacekeepers only 2400 are in place and are to all intent spectators.

Ethiopia, well aware that further turmoil in Somalia could spill over into their country is trying to fill the vacuum which is resulting in resentment amongst the Somali population. This opposition to the Ethiopian presence has in turn led to the creation of the Alliance for the Liberation of Somalia (ALS), an unlikely alliance of the ICU's youth and military wing, the al-Shabab, clan heads, Members of Parliament and religious leaders. Whilst al-Shahab and the ICU deny that they have any al Qaeda links diplomats do not share this view and the US Government has placed al-Shabab on its list of foreign terrorist organisations.

Somalia very clearly illustrates the problems we are facing in Africa in the fight against terrorist organisations. We are not dealing with one single terrorist organisation but with alliances of groupings which also include terrorist organisations, some of which are Islamic. Thus the biggest problem we are facing is understanding the dynamics of the situation at a regional, national and international level. Understanding the enemy will become increasingly vital.

ISPSW: In February of 2008 Henry Okah, a Nigerian activist, was extradited to Nigeria by the Angolan Government. He stands accused of delivering arms to at least 5 organisations in Nigeria. Does this represent arms trafficking or the support of a terrorist organisation?

MW: Well, firstly Okah's extradition is probably illegal as no extradition treaty exists between the two countries. Besides the arms running charge he also stand accused of being a leading member of MEND, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta. This organisation seeks to ensure that the ethnic minorities in the region benefit from the oil revenues, however more serious is the potential secessionist movement behind this demand.

Like in Sudan, the Nigerian Government fears a fragmentation of the country more than anything else. In the case of Nigeria this is even more significant than in Sudan as all the oil wealth is in this disputed area and memories of Biafra are still very much in the mind of the Nigerian politicians. At all cost do they want to prevent this happening again.

MEND have clearly stated that Okah is for a peaceful solution to the problem of unequal distribution of the oil wealth and consider him a hero of the rebellion against the Nigerian government and the oil industry which they accuse of usurping their oil wealth, destroying their environment and impoverishing the local population.

The Nigerian government makes no distinction between armed or peaceful opposition to the status quo, however, as the case of Ken Saro-Wiwa illustrates. He led a non-violent campaign against the oil companies and was hanged after a flawed murder trial. MEND cannot be compared to terrorist organisations such as al Qaeda. The latter are indiscriminate in their fight to achieve their aims. MEND, whilst violent, focuses its attentions on those who in their view exploit the region. In the eyes of the Nigerian government Okah is a terrorist and a gun runner, in the region he is a Nigerian Robin Hood.

The example of Okah illustrates the problems we are up against in the fight against terrorism in Africa very well. He is very much in the mould of the colonial freedom fighters who ended up running the continent following the departure of the colonial powers in the 60s. Kenyatta was labelled a terrorist as was Mugabe and let's not forget Nelson Mandela. Today's terrorist often turns out to be tomorrow's respected leader, no more so than in Africa. The Nigerian government would be well advised not to make him a martyr but to use his influence in order to negotiate a solution to the real problems the country faces.

ISPSW: You advise Governments in Africa in their fight against terrorism. Why do they turn to you rather than say the British or German Government?

MW: Well, they don't turn to me; they turn to organisations and individuals who can give independent advice. African Governments also receive a great deal of support in their fight

against terrorism from western Governments, including the UK and Germany. What independent consultants offer is advice which has no national baggage and which can therefore in certain cases provide more realistic advice than a Government can.

Sudan, for example, is still on the US watch list of countries which support terrorist organisations. Nevertheless, there is still cooperation between the two countries in the fight against international terrorism. It would however be very difficult for the US government, for domestic political reasons, to openly advise the Sudanese government. I also think that it would be quite difficult to provide objective advice in such a situation, I am also sure that any advice given would not be taken at face value as the underlying reason for the advice would be questioned by those in Sudan opposed to US Government policy.

A further reason is the wide spread perception that western societies do not respect Africa in general and Moslems specifically. Add to this the support for Israel by the West, the involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan and you will have some of the reasons why African Governments also turn to independent consultants for advice.

Western governments can and do provide support in training anti-terrorist units in the fight against terrorism and also provide relevant intelligence. At the same time, intelligence agencies in African countries also contribute to the flow of information. What is much trickier is to provide advice on necessary political reforms to prevent terrorism as this can be seen as an involvement in domestic political processes. Here consultants can provide a valuable service.

ISPSW: Early warning of terrorist attacks is a challenge for all security services. You also make reference to the poor governance record in some African countries, inefficient ministries and lack of effective coordination between government agencies and ministries. How can security experts help resolve these problems?

MW: Knowing what will happen in advance is obviously part of the solution. In Western Europe the security services have a good track record in uncovering attacks before they take place, as we saw in Germany last year in the case of the suitcase bombers. This however only works if one has informers or the manpower available to conduct discrete observation over a long period of time. This is not a skill which one can acquire overnight, nor is it easy.

It also depends upon cast iron security within the agencies conducting observations. That is not the case in many African countries where the Government itself has no clear agenda in fighting terrorism. In some instances members of the Government are a part of the problem thus making covert observation difficult at best. This is why good governance is a prerequisite for effective counter terrorist measures. There is no simple answer to this fundamental problem. If there were, we would have found it by now.

Good governance is central to the effective administration of a states resources (that includes the servants of the state), the rule of law, the creation of a functioning private sector and the development of a strong civil society. Without this in place there can be no really successful anti terrorist programme.

The lack of a well functioning civil service, armed forces and security services also means that crisis mitigation following an attack is largely uncoordinated and ineffective. This can conceivably lead to the response to an attack being more damaging than the attack itself.

Security experts can only help in continuously pointing this out to African governments and making clear what the economic, social and security consequences are of poor governance. They can help in training crisis response teams and also in the learning of basic security procedures. One can provide officers with the necessary command and management skills and the tactical knowledge to be in a position to counter a terrorist threat at the operational and tactical level. Soldiers can be trained to respond to terrorist attacks in a measured manner. Security services can also learn how to gather and interpret intelligence and how to act on such information. The chain, however, is only as strong as its weakest link and currently in Africa that weak link is weak or divided governments caused by a lack of sound governance.

ISPSW: COBRA in the UK is a model which you believe works well. Could such an organisation work for an African country?

MW: I see no reason why that should not be the case, in fact it makes a great deal of sense to use COBRA as a bench mark. However I would like to remind you of what I just said about the lack of governance in many African nations, without that in place a COBRA like organisation could not be really effective. COBRA is a decision making authority which receives intelligence, interprets the intelligence and issues instructions to the relevant authorities such as the Police, the Armed Forces, the Security Services etc. It does not micromanage the event but depends upon others to act as it instructs. It depends upon having a range of well trained and loyal people from various organisations who will carry out its decisions.

ISPSW: You mention the role the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) plays in resolving some of the problems you addressed in your article. How can European experts support this effort?

MW: Firstly I believe that IGAD can and should play a strong role in bringing better governance to Africa. This to me is one of the most important challenges facing the continent today. As I have said, this lack of governance is the root cause of poverty, inequality, poor health care and many of the other problems which Africa faces today. Lack of governance is the main cause of terrorism and also a hindrance in the fight against terrorism. Africa must take ownership of this development and needs to set its own benchmarks which might very well differ from those set by European nations. European experts can play a supporting role in this process by passing on specific skills which can be used by African governments. In a free economy a corporation can either decide to make a product it might need or to buy it from another supplier or even competitor. Africa cannot buy good governance from Europe; it has to make good governance by itself. European experts can advise on how best to do so, but no more than that.

Remarks:

Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



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