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TERRORISM IN AFRICA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE EFFICACY OF U.S. COUNTERTERRORISM

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Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

In the twenty years following the September 11th, 2001 attacks, the United States sent military forces around the world as part of its Global War on Terror. Simultaneously, the African continent experienced unprecedented levels of violence from Islamic extremist groups. Between 2004 and 2014, Sub-Saharan Africa saw a rise from 500 deaths and 50 attacks to 13,000 casualties in 2,300 attacks¹. While casualties have since subsided, terrorism has grown. In response, the US has offered record military aid to African nations to develop local security forces and counterterrorism efforts. In 2007, the US established a new combatant command with direct responsibility for the African continent, Africa Command (AFRICOM). Since then, this command has directed US resources to insert US troop advisors with partner forces, host joint-training exercises, build military installations, and provide other aid. Unfortunately, existing literature suggests these efforts have reaped little or, in some cases, failed to stem the spread of violent Islamic extremism. While the reasons for blunted US efforts are complex, there are significant limitations to US counterterrorism doctrine. AFRICOM's mission on the continent has been challenging with poor local governance and weak security force partners. Even so, in two decades, the world's most powerful military has made marginal gains in its war on terrorism on the African continent.

This paper seeks to evaluate the US' effect on terrorism on the African continent as existing literature continues to undervalue the pressure US military aid places on terror networks. Despite the US' efforts in Africa seemingly not reaping sweeping victories against terrorism in Africa, it would be remiss to understate how terrorist groups have been forced to adapt to the growing pressure of well-trained local counterterrorism forces supported by US forces. This evaluation is important as the results will provide significant policy implications. If the hypothesis is retained, it can be implied US policy should seek to further support and potentially expand training missions on the African continent. If rejected, the methods in which the US has participated in counterterrorism or its presence on the African continent may require reevaluation. Either result is crucial for understanding the requirements of achieving peace in Africa.

Literature Review

Extant literature on US counterterrorism in Africa has offered mixed reviews. While some praise the success of humanitarian and military development efforts, others point to the marginal gains of the US, often nullified by failures. The variability of perspectives points to Great Power competition, complexities of local politics, and inherent flaws in US aid.

As part of its global campaign to defeat terrorism at the source, support from the US has flowed into Africa at record numbers. It has arrived in the form of direct investment, humanitarian aid, diplomacy, and military aid and training. However, despite these investments, authors note the continued spread of terrorism. As studied by Nathaniel D.F. Allen, the lethality of violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram and al-Shabaab has only increased exponentially. Allen's research revealed a fivefold increase in battle-

¹ Allen, N. D. F. (2018). Assessing a Decade of U.S. Military Strategy in Africa. *Orbis*, 62(4), 655–669. <https://doi-org.lib.pepperdine.edu/10.1016/j.orbis.2018.08.011>

related deaths and a twenty-fold increase in deaths caused by terror attacks since 2007. This rise has co-occurred with increased military assistance from the US, sometimes surpassing \$1 billion. Compared to assistance prior to 2005, which never topped \$300 million, such figures are a notable hike. However, at times these funds have been found to support governments accused of human rights violations. These records of violence remain comparably lower than the 1990s conflict-related deaths in Africa.

Concern has risen around the correlation between recipients of US military aid and spikes in terror events². In his dissertation, Eric Splavec presented a statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.01$) between terror events and US military aid disbursements amongst members of the East African Community. Although developmental aid and foreign direct investment have had positive effects in negating terrorism, a positive relationship between military aid and recipient countries is less clear. However, research conducted by Jan Bachmann and Jana Hönke, points to increasingly interconnected security and development policies³. Many states, seeking development assistance, often receive US aid under condition of use for security-sector reform. In a further study of this unique emphasis on counterterrorism, when considering aid disbursement, Andrew Boutton and David B. Carter revealed that terrorist attacks on US interests garner aid to the local nation. In contrast, the presence of terrorism in the same nation, targeting non-US interests, reaps little to no aid allocation⁴. With few exceptions, threats to US allies were not found to be associated with US foreign aid allocation.

In the scope of Great Power competition, Raffaello Pantucci acknowledges the challenges the US faces in being replaced by its competitors as a predominant counterterrorism force in Africa⁵. Compared to Western nations, Russia has been willing to provide support without criticism of local methods of governance, including illiberal practices. Offering such unconditional services has been attractive to local leaders. Furthermore, after nearly two decades of counterterrorism support, the US and its Western allies have accrued a poor track record. Security forces they have built up have gone on to abuse their citizens and induce significant civilian casualties. Meanwhile, the Islamic State has only grown, and Al Shabaab and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) have continued to thrive. This reality has made services from Russian paramilitary forces attractive in the face of unproductive Western efforts.

Since the genesis of the GWOT and specifically the establishment of AFRICOM in 2007, Sub-Saharan Africa has seen an influx of Jihadist terror events and interest from

² Splavec, E. (2022). *The Merits of Military Aid: An Examination of the Interactions between US Military Aid and Terrorism in the East African Community* (Order No. 29210432). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2708326968).

<https://lib.pepperdine.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/merits-military-aidexamination-interactions/docview/2708326968/se-2>

³ Bachmann, J., & Hönke, J. (2010). "Peace and Security" as Counterterrorism? The Political Effects of Liberal Interventions in Kenya. *African Affairs*, 109(434), 97–114. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40388448>

⁴ Boutton, A., & Carter, D. B. (2014). Fair-Weather Allies? Terrorism and the Allocation of US Foreign Aid. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 58(7), 1144–1173. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24545618>

⁵ Pantucci, R. (2023). Counter Terrorism Meets Great Power Conflict in Africa. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 15(2), 18–23. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48718088>

the US⁶. Hayat Alvi attributes the permeability of unstable African nations to the recent proliferation of violent Jihadist groups on the continent. Furthermore, there is an irrefutable correlation between the onset of the GWOT and the subsequent rise of extremist groups. These foreign terror organizations (FTO) include the Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliates such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Shabaab or “al-Qaeda’s foot soldiers in East Africa,” and the Nigerian Boko Haram. Weak local governance and policymaking are undoubtedly facilitating the continued infestation of FTOs.

Avenues of US aid to African nations are broad, but one known as security force assistance (SFA) has stood out as a staple in recent years. Compared to the decades-long, massive boots-on-the-ground efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald, and Ryan Baker have identified SFAs as the US’ current ‘small-footprint’ global alternative of choice⁷. These small training operations, meant to develop local partner forces, often result in small payoffs. Upper-bound gains are largely achievable only when the US is willing to engage with local politics, which is untrue with many SFA partners. Therefore, these missions have been found to be, by nature, significantly limited in scope. Nevertheless, several successful cases were noted, such as the Philippines, Colombia, and the upscaled SFA mission in South Korea. Several case studies reaped ‘breakeven’ results, such as in El Salvador, Iraq, and Syria. Boutton further emphasizes this mixed record of US success in foreign military assistance by noting its effects on fueling political violence in various contexts⁸. Strong evidence correlates assistance to increases in domestic political violence amongst newly established democracies, military juntas, and personalist regimes. In comparison, new regimes that do not receive aid experience notably less political violence. These findings imply external military support can inadvertently destabilize allies. These studies of US military aid, particularly SFAs, serve as insight into the African continent’s most heavily used counterterrorism tool and how it may be inherently limited in capacity to induce aggregate change without careful policy reconsiderations.

Theoretical Argument

Continued US pressure on FTOs has forced an adaptation in extremist groups’ warfare doctrine. This paper establishes the threshold for a change in doctrine as fewer attacks and higher lethality. If attacks throughout the GWOT have decreased, but lethality has increased per attack, the null hypothesis is retained. However, if attacks climb while median lethality decreases, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative is retained. Implications of the former suggest FTOs are being suppressed and must find ways to inflict greater damage during fewer attacks. The latter suggests that FTOs are under less strategic pressure per strike and can afford to conduct higher volumes of attacks with

⁶ Alvi, H. (2019). Terrorism in Africa: The Rise of Islamist Extremism and Jihadism. *Insight Turkey*, 21(1), 111–132. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26776050>

⁷ Biddle, S., Macdonald, J., & Baker, R. (2017). Small footprint, small payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41(1–2), 89–142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1307745>

⁸ Boutton, A. (2021). Military Aid, Regime Vulnerability and the Escalation of Political Violence. *British Journal of Political Science*, 51(2), 507-525. doi:10.1017/S000712341900022X

lower rates of median lethality. While higher civilian and security force casualties are not an ultimate desire, this paper seeks to understand how FTOs have been forced to react to counterterrorism, if at all.

Null Hypothesis (H₀): As US-led counterterrorism efforts continue, FTO attacks decrease while median lethality increases.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_a): As US-led counterterrorism efforts continue, FTO attacks increase while median lethality decreases.

Research Design

The research for this theoretical argument was conducted through existing terrorism-tracking databases. An assessment of terrorism levels throughout the GWOT from 2001 to the present was made with an emphasis on the period following 2015, the year terrorism-related deaths hit their peak⁹. US-led counterterrorism efforts were the independent variable during the analysis, with terrorist attacks and their lethality as the dependent variable.

Utilizing databases derived from the Armed Conflict Location & Data Event Project (ACLED)'s Regional Overview on Africa and Vision of Humanity's Global Terrorism Index (GTI), qualitative analyses were made on levels of terrorism on the continent over the periods above. Conflict trends, including demonstrations, civil war, and terrorism incidents, were provided by ACLED. These events of violence or unrest were compared to US troop deployments on the continent, as disclosed by AFRICOM. The command listed deployments at US drone bases, 'enduring sites,' or 'non-enduring sites.' In search of a holistic casualty breakdown over the same period, the Global Terrorism Index was scrutinized for de-aggregated empirical data. Year-over-year comparisons of attacks and casualties were identified. Unifying these sources was critical in understanding how US efforts have affected African FTO activity. The broader trends offered by ACLED provided a sweeping look at the continent. Information provided by the Global Terrorism Index was crucial in finding precise casualty reports. Furthermore, comparison with sites of US troops allowed for analysis of whether US forces are synonymous with the shifting lethality of terror attacks.

Findings Analysis and Discussion

Upon analysis, the null hypothesis was retained. The 2023 GTI revealed that terrorism-related deaths have decreased by 38% since 2015. Overall, global terror attacks also fell, decreasing by 28%¹⁰. The Islamic State ranked number one and al-Shabaab at number two for most deaths caused by terrorism in 2022. Despite decreased attacks, a review of

⁹ Pandit, P. (2023, October 17). *Global Terrorism Index 2022: Key Findings*. Vision of Humanity. <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/global-terrorism-index-2023-key-findings-in-5-charts/>

¹⁰ Institute for Economics & Peace. (2023b, March). *Global Terrorism Index 2023: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*. Vision of Humanity. <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/GTI-2023-Briefing-web-170423.pdf>

the two groups' lethality revealed record rates of 2.9 and 2.5 deaths per attack, respectively. Despite global downtrends, Sub-Saharan Africa recorded the largest rise in terrorism deaths, with the Sahel being the most impacted region in the world. ACLED's overview supported these findings and noted the persisting conflict in Lake Chad Basin and Horn of Africa regions, all with a US military presence¹¹. Much conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa, observed by ACLED, was demonstrations and political violence¹². No relationship between these additional forms of conflict and the GTI's findings on terrorism was sought for this paper. The AFRICOM briefing provided by National Defense University delivered critical insight into US activities on the continent. In its 2021 Fragile States Index, the Sahel, Lake Chad Basin, and the Horn of Africa were classified as 'warning' or 'alert.' A comparison of AFRICOM's official listing of military installations to the GTI and ACLED databases presented a substantial correlation between US troop presence and terrorism hotspots. The aggregation of these findings suggested US counterterrorism operations are occurring in the same regions where terror attacks are decreasing, and lethality is increasing.

There are, however, limitations to these findings. Due to the classified nature of US combat operations in an environment highly contested by FTOs and Great Power competitors, this research faced challenges in quantifying the full extent of the US presence in Africa. This study did not consider the effects of other strategically aligned military deployments, including the United Kingdom, France, Sweden, and the United Nations. Furthermore, a causal relationship between US-led counterterrorism efforts and a shift in FTO attack methodology could not be established. Despite data suggesting FTO behavior may be reacting to increased pressure from counterterrorism, no more than a correlation may be asserted at this time. The ACLED database provided a glimpse into additional factors affecting the US' counterterrorism progress as it measured political violence and civil unrest. For this paper, further findings on the status of local governance and political dynamics were omitted but are encouraged to be studied in future literature. Although previous literature has established a correlation between US aid and recipient nations experiencing subsequent terror attacks, the scope of research conducted did not add or subtract from these assertions. Additionally, no statistically significant research was found to correlate US troops to subsequent terror attacks in partner nations, nor a reciprocal relationship.

Conclusion

Literature regarding US counterterrorism efforts on the African continent has often pointed to its marginal gains or failure to stem terrorist activity significantly. However, this paper sought to holistically analyze the extent of US military actions and their effects on terrorist activity by analyzing shifts in FTO behavior in reaction to US-led counterterrorism operations. To accomplish this, civilian databases, in conjunction with publicly disclosed information from AFRICOM, were analyzed to find whether the presence of US troops was correlated with decreased attacks and increased lethality from terror groups. Findings

¹¹ Thresher, SgtMaj. R. D. (2023). *USAFRICOM - National Defense University*. National Defense University . <https://keystone.ndu.edu/Portals/86/AFRICOM%20Brief%20%28Keystone%2023-1%29.pdf>

¹² Ladd Serwat, H. N. (2023, December 7). *Regional Overview: Africa: November 2023*. ACLED. <https://acleddata.com/2023/12/07/regional-overview-africa-november-2023/>

supported the null hypothesis as the Islamic State and al-Shabaab were found to have significantly reduced the volume of their attacks in recent years while lethality per attack increased. In line with the hypothesis, these findings were interpreted as FTOs adapting to pressure from counterterrorism operations and substituting high-volume low lethality attacks for low-volume high-lethality attacks. These findings remained limited, however—the inability to fully gauge the US presence due to restrictions on public information access challenged research efforts. Furthermore, no shifts in the African political environment at the local governance level were assessed among a plethora of potentially influencing factors. The research remained limited in its hopes to assess US counterterrorism operations and shifts in FTO tactics. The findings of this paper have profound policy implications as they ultimately support the hypothesis that US troops are having an effect in suppressing FTOs in Africa. The aggregate drop in terrorism-related incidents and fatalities supports this assertion. It may be in the interest of policymakers to ramp up SFA operations on the continent to reap larger payoffs as opposed to the ongoing ‘small footprint’ operations reaping small payoffs. Further research should be conducted with statistical analyses for a comprehensive analysis of US counterterrorism operations and their effect on FTOs to fill the gaps in existing literature, including the shortcomings of this paper and its analyses.

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