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The Threat of Terrorism in Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa

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Three organizations: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram constitute the greatest terrorist threats to Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa. They are all Islamist in nature but reports of their close links and coordination are premature. These organisations are mostly focused on activities in Algeria, Somalia and Nigeria and possess neither the strength nor the means to establish cooperation. The United States, which conducts counterterrorism operations in Africa, and to a lesser extent the European Union, which is engaged in assistance and humanitarian activities on the continent, could play positive roles in combating these organizations.

Introduction. On 26 August 2011, the Nigerian organization Boko Haram (BH, “Western Education is a Sin”) conducted a suicide bombing at the United Nations office in the Nigerian capital, Abuja, in which 21 people were killed. Even before the attack, BH was accused by the commander of U.S. forces in Africa (AFRICOM), Gen. Carter Ham, of collaborating with two Al Qaeda-associated organizations: the Northern African Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which in 2007 attacked a similar UN office in Algeria, and the Somali Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (HSM, or al-Shabaab, “youth”). The existence of such links would amount to cooperation between the three most dangerous terrorist organizations in Africa. Their presumed coordination could constitute one of the biggest challenges to African security.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. AQIM is a jihadist group formerly known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (SGPC) that aims to overthrow the secular governments of North Africa. The SGPC consisted mostly of Algerians, but since its 2007 unification with Al Qaeda, it has become much more international in character. Although it failed to start jihadist uprisings in Northern Africa, SGPC from 2008 has successfully conducted criminal attacks (especially kidnappings for ransom) in the Sahel.

In the summer of 2011, AQIM managed to stage spectacular terrorist attacks in Algeria like the suicide bombing at a military academy in Cherchell, in the north of the country, in which 18 people were killed. This event may herald the beginning of a new AQIM terrorist campaign in the north of the continent, especially in Algeria, that could be financially and logistically supported by terrorist cells operating in Mali, Mauritania and Niger that were previously engaged in criminal activity. The organization applied a similar pattern of alternating the use of its structures for criminal and terrorist activities between 2003 and 2007.

A new AQIM offensive could be assisted by some of the Libyan jihadists who were engaged in the Libyan civil war on the rebel side and who may wish to take revenge on Algeria for offering refuge to some members of the al-Qaddafi family.

Al-Shabaab. HSM is a faction of the Islamic Courts Union, which in 2006 for a short period of time controlled southern and central Somalia. The union fell apart after the Ethiopian intervention in Somalia in December 2006, and its most radical members gathered in HSM. It controls much of southern and central Somalia, which in 2011 has suffered famine.¹ HSM recruits members from

¹ K. Werner, “Somalia and the Humanitarian Crisis in the Horn of Africa”, *PISM Bulletin*, No. 89 (306), 22 September 2011.

among the radicalized Somali diaspora in, for example, the United States and Canada, and has performed spectacular suicide bombings (the latest on 18 October). It pledges allegiance to Al Qaeda and accepts humanitarian aid from it for famine stricken areas under HSM control while simultaneously rejecting similar offers from the international community.

Somali jihadists are the beneficiaries of more than 20 years of political instability in the country. HSM is involved in fighting the Transitional Federal Government (TRF), which controls only the capital of the country (Mogadishu) but which is recognized by the international community, the troops of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and rival Islamist and separatist factions. In October 2011, the Kenyan army intervened in southern Somalia in order to combat pirates operating in the Horn of Africa from bases located in areas under nominal HSM control. In addition, U.S. special forces and unmanned aircraft based in Ethiopia and the Seychelles also operate in the country and target members of Al Qaeda in Somalia.

Boko Haram. This organisation was founded in 2002 and operates in the northern, Muslim part of Nigeria. BH aims to transform the country into an Islamic theocracy and is known for its anti-systemic and anti-corruption rhetoric and utilizes widespread Northern Nigerian dissatisfaction with the outcome of the recent presidential elections, in which the winner was a Christian from the south—Goodluck Jonathan.

In recent years, Nigerian Islamists have ceased their policy of open confrontation with the Nigerian security forces, which came close to breaking up the group with mass arrests and repressive tactics in 2009. The organization is increasingly focused on carrying out spectacular suicide attacks outside its original core operational area.

American and European Involvement in Combating Terrorism in Africa. The three most dangerous terrorist organizations in Africa operate in areas that are largely beyond the control of the African states opposing them. The governments of Somalia, and to a lesser extent Algeria and Nigeria, do not have the necessary means to neutralize their terrorist adversaries. In addition to that, the AQIM, HSM and BH rhetoric and modus operandi suggest wider, transcontinental operational ambitions that attract the attention of the United States and Europe.

The United States actively supports African efforts to combat terrorism through the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, which involves 10 African countries and which is aimed at the strengthening of local anti- and counterterrorism capabilities, enhancing cooperation among these countries, discrediting the ideology utilized by the terrorist organizations, developing military cooperation between the U.S. and the African countries and promoting democratic political practices in Africa. In addition, the United States is also militarily present and conducts similar programs in eastern Africa with the U.S. Army Battle Group stationed in Djibouti.

The European contribution to combating terrorism in Africa is usually bilateral in nature and is linked to the activities of intelligence agencies of former colonial states. While using its Counterterrorism Coordinator, the European Union also is seeking to promote democratic and transparent practices of anti- and counterterrorism on the African continent and foster Afro-European cooperation in this field. In addition to that, the EU funds or co-funds assistance projects in Nigeria—AMISOM and Somali troop training—and combats piracy in the waters of the Indian Ocean around Somalia in the EU's first naval operation.

Conclusions and Recommendations. AQIM, HSM and BH constitute a serious threat to the security of some of Africa's regions. However, only the first of these organizations is active in more than one country, it also Africanises its command cadre, which no longer consists solely of Algerians but also of Sub-Saharan nationals. HSM and BH are operationally focused on Somalia and Nigeria, respectively, and their attacks on targets of international character are meant to provide them with popularity and publicity. There are not, however, designed to signal further internationalization of their operational activities since none of these organisations is ready to follow such a path.

This does not mean that the African countries should not continue to receive American or European aid, through which they can develop comprehensive counterterrorism strategies. The integration of the military and intelligence activities of the U.S. and the aid efforts of the EU would undoubtedly be of major help in this process, as would exerting more pressure on the governments of in the region, although Algeria theoretically is not interested in cooperation. This pressure should be put on Nigeria to ensure balanced development in both the Christian and Muslim parts of the country and on Somalia to seek agreement with the representatives of all regions and political groups in Somalia (including the Islamists).