

Terrorist Groups from Mali to Somalia: A Review of Counter-terrorism Efforts and Priorities

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Mali and Somalia present major challenges to counter-terrorism efforts due to the mismatch between how these places are actually governed and the kinds of effective formal state structures that are foundations of effective counter-terrorism policies. Effective counter-terrorism rests upon the principle that there must be a government that has the political will and capacity to effectively engage citizens to collect information and to isolate targets. There must be a cohesive indigenous security apparatus to at least collaborate with foreign partners if it is not capable of managing terrorist threats on its own. In the absence of these conditions, counter-terrorism is reduced to the exercise of periodic strikes from foreign forces that do little to affect the conditions that harbor these threats in the first place.

The near absence of effective formal state structures in much of Mali and Somalia, coupled with local political logics based on kinship social structures pose serious challenges to a sustainable counter-terrorism strategy. These political logics hold sway in other collapsed states, where political decisions involve constant wrangling and discussion, amidst widespread insecurity and constantly changing political conditions forcing local leaders to hedge bets and prepare to shift sides in political battles. Throughout the conflicts in Mali (since 2012) and in Somalia (since 1991), it often has been difficult to distinguish between rebels and government, subversion and support, and legal and illicit, as individuals have to act on divided loyalties and multiple motives. This means that the real ground level political authorities in these countries often provide refuge for counter-terrorism targets, even when they cooperate with foreign efforts to identify these targets and limit terrorist access to their communities.

These political situations pose significant challenges for counter-terrorism policy. To pressure these governments to act decisively against terrorist threats overestimates their capacities to do so, and risks undermining the pillars of what little domestic institutional authority they possess. Pressure can backfire in other ways, strengthening terrorist groups as local authorities look to these groups for protection against their own state, and give these groups more direct access to local communities. The alternative is to engage directly with these local authorities, although this entangles the outsider in the intricate cross-currents of local politics and can empower local leaders against the long-term project of building effective state institutions. Effective counter-terrorism policy includes contingent adaptations to the conditions of state collapse in Mali and Somalia, with a bias toward the construction of a stronger central authority that is able to monitor and regulate populations and that is able to resist infiltration and collaboration with terrorist groups.

The record of counter-terrorism in Somalia provides a good illustration of the problems besetting counter-terrorism in a collapsed state, as well as to policy recommendations. Counter-terrorism in Mali illustrates similar problems, but against the backdrop of greater continuity of formal state structures, at least in the capital. Likewise, contingent counter-terrorism solutions there point toward additional considerations that can be used to guide effective policy. In each case, policy recommendations are premised on the reality that their effectiveness will fall short of what can be achieved in more capable states. Engaging to build such states, however, reaches far beyond the political and material realities that guide most counter-terrorism strategies.

Somalia provides an ideal setting for examining counter-terrorism strategies in collapsed states. On 1 September 2014, American forces succeeded in killing Ahmed Abdi Godane, a leader of al-Shabaab who had claimed responsibility for the Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi, Kenya that killed 67 civilians and security forces. Godane also oversaw numerous plots against foreigners across the East Africa region. Prior to this strike, however, American forces made several attempts to kill him, each one preceded by the target's fortuitous escape. In one instance, numerous civilians had gathered to greet American forces who then withdrew rather than inflict numerous civilian casualties. These events suggest that the target received tips. Many Somalis suspect that local intelligence networks, including the Somali

Government's National Intelligence and Security Agency, harbor infiltrators. Likewise, a failed French attempt in January, 2013 to rescue an intelligence agent held by al-Shabaab pointed to the problem of infiltration. The French needed local information to launch a surprise attack and rescue mission, but instead walked into a trap. The attackers encountered heavily armed al-Shabaab fighters who held them down for hours and killed two French soldiers.

These incidents and numerous similar others, point to the problem of local patterns of alliances and opposition that facilitate the sharing of information. For example, a power-sharing deal in 2008 that led to the formation of the intelligence agency gave clan groups, who also selectively collaborated with terrorists, opportunities to infiltrate their agents into security and intelligence services. These groups did this to hedge their bets, working all sides in an unstable situation. Their actions are rational for protecting their narrow kin or clan group interests, but also help to sustain the wider instability that makes the construction of state institutions so difficult in Somalia.

Counter-terrorism policy in Somalia is likely to continue to include strikes on terrorist leaders, including ones coordinated through the state intelligence and security services. Thus, external actors have tried to foster the autonomy of these services from the cross currents of local politics. They do this through finding foreign private contractors who will train and monitor local agents. This limits the sharing of information, and gives clan groups that are more deeply vested in these services more confidence so that they can shift their collaborations more exclusively to the government's security and intelligence institutions rather than playing all sides. While increasing the effectiveness of this arm of the state, it also causes other clan groups to suspect that these groups use this control to assert their narrow interests and to dominate those who are not so well connected. Observers also note that the favored clans appear to get preferential access to private security contracts for which foreigners pay. This concentration of power in the realm of kinship networks in which the real politics of Somalia are played out frightens some government officials who fear that these services will gain enough autonomy to defy their orders.

Similar patterns appear in Puntland, a quasi-autonomous government in Somalia's northeast. There a private military service company provided the regional government's security forces with aerial surveillance and fire support for operations engaging al-Shabaab fighters. While some of these targets were actual al-Shabaab fighters, some turned out to be business rivals of government officials and fighters who were trying to hold onto land that government officials wanted to appropriate in favor of their own clans.

Turning to Mali, similar dilemmas appear. Though state structures are more intact relative to those in Somalia, Mali's government relies heavily on about 1,000 French soldiers who arrived in January, 2013 to fight militants that were linked to terrorist attacks across the region by groups such as al Qaeda in the Maghreb. French officials stated that they were filling a "security vacuum" that threatened to destabilize further collapsing states such as Libya, Chad and Central African Republic.

These efforts also became subject to local political cross currents. In May 2014, for example, government forces attacked a town under the control of three groups with prolific records of switching sides but who selectively cooperated with French forces. Beyond killing about 50 government soldiers and taking an equal number of hostages, the attack weakened government forces as parts of the military that shared networks with the targets scrambled to protect their interests, further weakening what state institutions exist.

Mali and Somalia show the seriousness of dilemmas facing counter-terrorism strategies in collapsed states. Foreign actors cannot rely on state institutions to deliver information and collaboration needed to target terrorists, much less to remedy underlying conditions that enable terrorists to use the territories of these countries as refuges. The people who really know what goes on at ground level struggle to find security for their immediate community, and thus share information. Their infiltration and collaboration with numerous groups, including terrorists, enables them to hedge bets but also makes them problematic partners in counter-terrorism operations. The most logical immediate solution is to build stronger security and intelligence organizations, even if this has to be done through foreign private contractors and against the interests of officials of the recognized government.

Ultimately, the problem is one of moral hazard. The more that external actors help local partners become more effective as partners in counter-terrorism operations, the more likely external actors are to enable their local partners to pursue other interests that contribute to the conditions that make these places attractive to terrorists. This dilemma cannot be solved in the near term, short of embarking on comprehensive state-building projects. Therefore it is likely that current policy represents about the best that can be done. The only real modification in the short-term is to gain as complete an understanding of local politics as possible so as to avoid manipulation and information leaks. In the long-term, effective counter-terrorism in these states is dependent upon establishing some sort of competent and locally acceptable security apparatus, though problems in Somalia show how difficult this can be to do.

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