



## A breeding ground for terrorists? Africa & Britain's 'war on terrorism'

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# A Breeding Ground for Terrorists? Africa & Britain's 'War on Terrorism'

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*Rita Abrahamsen*

**Prime Minister Tony Blair has famously described Africa as a 'scar on the conscience of the world', drawing attention to the UK's moral and humanitarian obligations towards the continent. This article argues that New Labour's increasing attention to Africa is best understood in the context of an ongoing 'securitisation' of the continent, which received added impetus following the events of September 11, 2001. Through this securitisation, interactions and dealings with Africa are gradually shifting from the category of 'development/humanitarianism' towards a category of 'risk/fear/threat', so that today the continent is increasingly mentioned in the context of the 'war on terrorism'. While the main responses to Africa's problems are still drawn predominantly from traditional development policies, there are subtle, yet significant changes in New Labour's policies and practices that may have significant future implications for Africa and its peoples.**

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the extent to which US policies towards Africa has moved towards a more aggressive and militarised approach, aimed at protecting and securing access to strategic resources and military bases, has been widely noted. Justified as part of the 'war on terrorism', the United States has increased its presence in Africa, particularly in the Horn, in the oil rich states and in the Sahel, which is regarded as a buffer zone between Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa, as other contributions have brought out. A number of military training programmes are underway, mostly designed to increase counter-terrorism capacity and prevent terrorists from finding convenient bases from where to regroup (see Abramovici 2004; Ellis 2004; Keenan 2004a; 2004b; Lyman and Morrison 2004). At first glance, Britain's Africa policies appear very different. Prime Minister Tony Blair has famously described Africa as a 'scar on the conscience of the world', urging the international community to pay greater attention to the continent's pressing humanitarian problems (Blair, 2001). Similarly, the 'war on terrorism' appears far removed from Blair's Commission for Africa, whose seventeen members are tasked with 'taking a fresh look at the challenges Africa faces' and helping the continent achieve the Millennium Development Goals (see [www.dfid.gov.uk](http://www.dfid.gov.uk) <<http://www.dfid.gov.uk>>; see Plaut in this issue).

While Britain's actions on the continent are less visibly militarised and less explicitly concerned with access to mineral resources, this article argues that there are significant similarities between American and British policies. New Labour's approach to Africa has changed in subtle, yet important ways following the events of September 11. In particular, Africa is increasingly placed in the context of the

'fight against terrorism' and the dangers it poses to Britain and the international community. Britain's interactions with Africa are thus increasingly governed by a need to safeguard 'us' against the presumed dangers of the continent. Although the government presents their 'war on terrorism' in Africa as compatible with the 'war on poverty', the article concludes that there are good reasons to be wary of this shift in New Labour's policy discourse.

## Securitising Africa

Although the al-Qaida cells responsible for the terrorist attacks on the US had no more and probably fewer links to countries in sub-Saharan Africa than to London, Hamburg or Florida, '9/11' was quickly incorporated into policy discourses on Africa. The attacks were widely interpreted to demonstrate beyond dispute that conflict and unrest in one part of the world could spill over and destroy the lives of thousands on the other side of the globe. The *Security Strategy of the United States of America*, for example, argued that 'the events of September 11, 2001, taught us that weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interest as strong states' (White House, 2002:preface). 'In Africa', the document continues, 'promise and opportunity sit side by side with disease, war and desperate poverty. This threatens both the core values of the United States – preserving human dignity – and our strategic priority – combating global terror' (Ibid:10).

The British government provided very similar interpretations, making frequent references to how the terrorist attacks demonstrated the dangers of globalisation and a 'shrinking world' where boundaries become increasingly irrelevant. Thus, in his speech to the Labour Party conference shortly after September 11, Tony Blair stated that, 'Today conflicts rarely stay within national boundaries' (Blair, 2001). The sentiment was echoed by Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, who argued that it 'is no longer necessary to prove a direct link between a troubled faraway country and the order of our own societies ... Six months ago', he continued, 'no American could have proved a link between the chaos of Afghanistan and the safety of the thousands working in the World Trade Center'. Now, the changed Manhattan skyline is a constant reminder that 'disorder abroad can threaten security at home' (Straw, 2001). In the same way as Afghanistan's turmoil is seen to have brought devastation to the US, so Africa's perceived disorder is believed to threaten the West. Thus, for Straw a shattered window of the British Ambassadors' home in Kinshasa becomes not 'an immediate threat to British security. But neither can we take the view that conflicts such as the war in Congo is none of our business'. It has to be 'our business' because in the era of globalisation and interdependence conflicts, as Blair reminds us, rarely stays within national boundaries. Accordingly, the 'lesson of September 11', Straw argues, is that 'we cannot ignore the world and hope that it will go away' (Ibid.).

Following the attacks of September 11, so-called weak or failed states have increasingly been seen as a potential danger, not only to their domestic populations, but also to international peace and stability. The fact that Osama bin Laden coordinated his networks from Afghanistan, and speculation that al-Qaida profited from Sierra Leonean diamonds, have led to a widespread perception of failed states as a 'free trade zone for the underworld' (Farah, 2002). Thus, as the anniversary of the terrorist attacks was approaching, Jack Straw devoted an entire speech to the topic of 'Failed and Failing States' 2002. The dreadful events of September 11, he argued, give us a vision of one possible future: 'A future in which unspeakable acts

of evil are committed against us, coordinated from failed states in distant parts of the world'. The speech refers specifically to Somalia, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo DRC, invoking the Hobbesian image of a 'state of nature' without order and where 'continual fear and danger of violent death' render life 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' (Ibid.) The Foreign Secretary goes on to link 'failed states' directly to British social problems and national security: 'as well as bringing mass murder to the heart of Manhattan, state failure has brought terror and misery to large swathes of the African continent, as it did in the Balkans in the early 1990s. And at home it has brought drugs, violence and crime to Britain's streets'. Accordingly,

*we need to remind ourselves that turning a blind eye to the breakdown of order in any part of the world, however distant, invites direct threats to **our national security and well-being*** (Straw, 2002; emphasis added).

Similar concerns are clearly evident in Tony Blair's speech to the Labour Party conference in 2001, where the potential benefits and risks of globalisation form a central theme. The threat is not simply al-Qaida or terrorism, but is much more broadly conceived.

*the threat is chaos, because for people with work to do, family life to balance, mortgages to pay, careers to further, pensions to provide, the yearning is for order and stability and if it doesn't exist elsewhere, it is unlikely to exist here. I have long believed this interdependence defines the new world we live in* (Blair, 2001).

The statement is worth dwelling on. For Blair, 'chaos' is represented by those who do not go to work, who don't have mortgages to pay or careers to further. These people exist 'elsewhere' and they have the capacity to destroy the order and stability of 'here'. This is the seldom-noticed corollary to New Labour's vision of interdependence: the capacity of 'elsewhere' to impact on 'here'. While 'elsewhere' is not defined, the speech soon turns to the former Yugoslavia and to Rwanda, Sierra Leone, the DRC, Zimbabwe and more broadly 'the state of Africa'. Clearly this is where 'chaos' lurks, and where order and stability need to be imposed through the reasoned intervention of Britain and what Blair refers to as the 'world community'.

As a result of such interpretations, the question of how to deal with the 'elsewhere' in order to secure the 'here' occupies an increasingly central role in the government's policy towards Africa.

In a recent speech, Foreign Office Minister Chris Mullin argued that 'there are a number of reasons why Africa should matter to us' Mullin 2004. The first, he says, is moral, referring to 'the war, famine, disease and unspeakable barbarity that have haunted that tragic Continent for much of the twentieth century'. In addition to the moral arguments, there are practical reasons why Africa cannot be ignored. 'The most immediate of these is terrorism'. According to Mullin, it is a 'little known fact that there have been more Al Qaida attacks in Africa than anywhere else in the world. The fact that in parts of Africa such as Somalia entire societies have imploded makes them a ready breeding ground for terrorism'. Moreover, Mullin continues, it 'is also not widely realised that there are more Muslims south of the Sahara than in the Middle East'. Fortunately, he argues, most of them 'are moderates. If we want them to stay that way, we cannot neglect Africa'.

In the post-September 11 world, these are not innocent statements of geographical fact. They are instead highly political statements, with a potentially profound impact on how policies towards Africa are formulated and implemented and also on how the continent's people are perceived and treated. Mullin's statement is a clear demonstration of the extent to which Africa is increasingly seen as a threat, a place where terrorism flourishes and a potential safe-haven for radical Islam. Through this securitisation of Africa, dealings and interactions with the continent are gradually shifting from the category of 'development/humanitarianism' to a category of 'danger/fear/security'. This is not merely a question of 'rhetoric' or representation. Identifying something as a security issue is not an innocent practice, but has political implications and changes the legitimate mode of engagement with a particular problem Huysmans, 1998. Framed as a development/humanitarian issue, Africa encourages compassion and particular policy responses formulated and implemented primarily by the Department of International Development. Approached as a security issue, by contrast, Africa may encourage fear and unease, and this may in turn facilitate policy responses of a more militarised and illiberal nature, shifting the responsibility towards the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and perhaps also the Ministry of Defence. As the following section argues, this is to some extent evident in New Labour's policies towards Africa.

### **Africa & the 'War on Terrorism'**

Unlike the widely noted change in US Africa policies, UK policies towards the continent remain primarily framed within the familiar logic of development rather than militarism and terrorism. The aim is still to spread the lifestyles and sensibilities of the highly industrialised societies to the rest of the world. As such, the British government's main response to the problem of so-called failed states is best described as a fairly aggressive liberal universalism, aiming to 'convert' poor and failed states to the liberal values that Blair claims characterise the international community. As the Prime Minister expressed it: 'the starving, the wretched, the dispossessed, the ignorant, those living in want and squalor from the deserts of northern Africa to the slums of Gaza, to the mountain ranges of Afghanistan: they too are our cause'. And that cause is 'to bring those same values of democracy and freedom to people around the world' (Blair, 2001). Robert Cooper, a senior British diplomat who has been influential in shaping Blair's foreign policy agenda, describes this as a 'new liberal – and voluntary – imperialism', a world where 'the efficient and well-governed export stability and liberty' to welcoming poor and failed states (Cooper, 2002).

The patronising tone of such comments aside, it is worth noting that liberalism always contains the possibility of illiberal interventions in the lives of those who do not conform to the accepted standards of liberal civility. John Stuart Mill, for example, argued that liberty only applied to 'human beings in the maturity of their faculties', and hence regarded authoritarian government of the colonies as entirely consistent with liberal values (Mill, 1976:376-393). Today, states that refuse to reform according to the rules and norms of the liberal 'international community' face at best abandonment and the withdrawal of development assistance, at worst illiberal interventions to enforce compliance. In Cooper's blunt terminology; 'Amongst ourselves, we keep the law but when we are operating in the jungle, we must also use the laws of the jungle' (Cooper, 2002). The war on Iraq demonstrates the willingness of the British government to engage in illiberal acts to defend the liberal values of the 'international community'.

No such dramatic intervention is likely to take place on the African continent, and it is important to recognise that securitisation is entirely compatible with the relatively feeble international response to the brutal and prolonged conflict in the DRC, or in Darfur. Rather than direct military action, the securitisation of Africa is more likely to give rise to policies of containment, or policing. This is clearly evident in Straw's proposals for how to deal with failed states. Regarding such states as *a* potential breeding ground for terrorists, the Foreign Secretary suggests a division of labour whereby Western countries take responsibility for different parts of the world. 'This could mean', he argues, 'the EU, NATO or the OSCE taking the lead in dealing with problems around the margins of Europe; the French or ourselves perhaps jointly in parts of Africa, and countries like Canada or the US under the OAS in the Americas' (Straw, 2002). In effect, Straw assigns Western countries policing duties around the globe in order to contain or 'quarantine' disorder, and the reasoning is eerily reminiscent of Mill's endorsement of illiberal rule of 'uncivilised' nations. And while a lot less spectacular than direct military action, the justification for such illiberal actions is made easier by references to 'national security'. Through securitisation, the government reserves the right to 'use the law of the jungle' should it at any stage deem this necessary.

Importantly, there are signs that relations between Britain and Africa are becoming more militarised after September 11 and that resources are increasingly directed towards the security sector. The Horn of Africa, for example, has become a major military hub for Task Force 150, a naval unit jointly operated by the US, Britain, France, Spain, and Germany. In May 2003, Britain launched also its counter-terrorism programme, which is designed to develop the 'counter-terrorism and security capacity of weaker nations so as to best support them in protecting our shared interests' ([www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk) <<http://www.fco.gov.uk>>). The programme has been allocated £20 million in its first three years of operation, and the main areas of operation are Africa, the Middle East and Asia. The programme aims to help countries develop 'a coherent and complimentary range of capabilities that can detect, deter, disrupt and detain terrorists and their supporters' (Ibid.). Britain's development policies are also increasingly emphasising security sector reform, whereby development resources are used to train and equip police and soldiers. In Sierra Leone, for example, DFID cooperates with the UK Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office in a substantial effort to reform the state's security apparatuses, including a wholesale restructuring of its intelligence services. Such assistance is often a highly valuable part of a country's transition to peace and democracy, particularly in countries like Sierra Leone where unaccountable security forces have a long tradition of intervening in politics and abusing the civilian population. Similarly, counter-terrorism assistance is undoubtedly important for many countries. Nevertheless, these initiatives demonstrate the increasing securitisation of Africa, whereby the continent is increasingly placed in the context of the 'war on terror' and whereby its problems and challenges are increasingly seen as dangerous and threatening.

## **The Effects of Securitisation**

For the British government, the 'war on terrorism' and the 'war on poverty' are the two sides of the same coin. But there are good reasons to be wary of this easy link between poverty and acts of terrorism, and to place the securitisation of Africa under critical scrutiny. This is not to deny the continent's links to terrorist activities, but to argue for reflection on the effects of placing the continent in the context of security

and fear. One such potential effect is to help New Labour mobilise support for the 'war on terrorism'. Jack Straw's speech on 'Failed and Failing States' is interesting in this context: The speech was delivered shortly before the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks, and importantly, during the build up to the war on Iraq. Iraq figures prominently in the speech, with the Foreign Secretary justifying the impending war and action on 'failed states' in Africa as part of the *same* 'war on terrorism'. At a time of intense debate and fierce opposition to the government's policies, the securitisation of Africa can thus be seen as part of a political strategy to unify public and party support behind the government. Drawing Africa into the debate about security in this way may help to legitimate the 'war on terrorism', even giving it a 'humanitarian face' by linking it to the eradication of poverty and underdevelopment.

Securitisation is a political choice, a decision to conceptualise an issue in a particular way (see Wæver, 1995). One reason for placing an issue within a narrative of security might be a desire to give an issue a new sense of urgency, and viewed from this perspective, the process of securitising Africa and underdevelopment could be a potent weapon against the marginalisation of the continent and a way of justifying increased development assistance to a disgruntled British electorate, preoccupied with hospital queues and late commuter trains. Importantly, development assistance has increased significantly during Labour's time in office, and bilateral aid to sub-Saharan Africa stands at £528 million in 2001/02, and is set to increase to £1 billion by 2005/06 Amos, 2002. Total British development assistance, however, still stands at only 0.35% of GDP, a long way off the 0.7% target set by the UN. To date therefore, securitisation does not appear to have led to any substantial increase in financial assistance to the continent.

Even if securitisation could be said to facilitate increased aid, or *to* defend limited aid budgets in the face of competing demands from various constituencies, there are numerous reasons to question the desirability of approaching the continent's problems in security terms. While the process of securitisation does not necessarily or immediately give rise to radically different policies, it nevertheless has important political and ethical implications. Most security discourses are underpinned by an 'us vs. them' distinction and a logic of threat, and by conceptualising and representing Africa within such a framework, the relationship to the continent is changed in subtle, yet significant ways. By approaching Africa as a security concern, rather than as a developmental or humanitarian challenge, policy becomes guided by the desire to ensure more and better security for 'us'. While better security for Britain is presented as simultaneously providing a better life for people in Africa, the securitisation of the continent leads to policy responses informed by a desire to safeguard the 'here' against the 'elsewhere'.

This has potentially damaging consequences. Africa is given a negative image, wrapped up in a politics of fear that may contribute towards suspicion and hostility towards Africa's peoples. In this way, securitisation may contribute both to deteriorating race relations in Britain, and help justify strict immigration controls and asylum laws, as well as the erosion of civil liberties in the face of perceived terrorist threats. At the same time, securitisation serves to draw attention away from the West's contribution to the problems of underdevelopment and 'state failure'. Despite the attention to globalisation and interconnectedness in New Labour's discourse, underdevelopment, chaos and state failure become the expression of 'otherness', rather than an outcome and reflection of certain deficiencies and shortcomings in contemporary international relations between the north and the

south. The way in which decades of development policies advocating economic liberalisation and state curtailment have contributed to the weakening of the capacities and integrity of these states is overlooked, and the West remains, in the vocabulary of the Foreign Secretary, the 'doctor' able to both 'prevent' and 'cure' state failure Straw, 2002. Policies informed by this logic may perpetuate the underlying causes of 'state failure', rather than contribute to their solution. It remains to be seen how far this logic is behind the so-called Blair Commission on Africa (see Plaut in this issue).

Blair's Africa may be a 'scar on the conscience of the world', but it is simultaneously a dangerous place that can impinge on 'our national security and wellbeing'. While significantly different from the changes in US policies towards Africa post-September 11, New Labour's policy discourses have placed the continent firmly within a logic of fear and linked its underdevelopment to a threat of terrorism. In other words, New Labour's aggressive liberal internationalism and attention to the 'wretched of the earth' is intrinsically linked to a concern with security and the 'war on terrorism'. This approach has very little to offer in terms of solving Africa's development problems, and may even exacerbate these by placing the continent and its peoples on a continuum of fear and thereby facilitate future relations and policies underpinned by a desire to safeguard the 'international community', if necessary by recourse to illiberal means.

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