

# FIGHTING TERRORISM IN EAST AFRICA AND THE HORN



Phil Foster

**B** SIX YEARS AFTER THE BOMBINGS OF OUR EMBASSIES IN NAIROBI AND DAR ES SALAAM, U.S. COUNTERTERRORISM EFFORTS IN THE REGION DO NOT YET MEASURE UP TO THE THREAT.

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*BY DAVID H. SHINN*

efore Sept. 11, 2001, most Americans paid little attention to terrorism, particularly in the Third World. Since then, though the Middle East and Central Asia have figured most prominently in the war on terrorism, Africa is increasingly coming into focus as an important battleground.

This is especially true of East Africa (Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania) and the Horn of Africa (Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia), where the practice of targeting Americans for political violence has deep roots. The Black September organization assassinated the American ambassador to Sudan, Cleo A. Noel Jr., and his deputy

chief of mission, George Curtis Moore, in 1973. And following the U.S. air attack against Libya in 1986, Libyan terrorists retaliated by severely wounding an American embassy communications technician, William Caldwell, also in Khartoum. There have been a number of other terrorist attacks dating back more than two decades against Western and Israeli interests in this dangerous region.

But it took the coordinated bombings by al-Qaida in 1998 of the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam to make clear the full scope of the organization's menace. While the attacks killed far more Kenyans and Tanzanians than Americans, 12 Americans perished in Nairobi and many were injured in both capitals. (American and Ugandan authorities foiled another attack planned against the U.S. embassy in Kampala.)

Those bombings were, in many respects, even more of a seminal event than the 9/11 attacks for the American war on terrorism in East Africa and the Horn. The State Department responded by building new fortified embassies in both capitals, and in Kampala, with considerably more setback from the street. Other embassies in the region enhanced their physical security, as well.

There were also policy ramifications. Prior to the embassy bombings, the U.S. had a cool relationship with Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi as a result of concerns over corruption and the pace of democratization. When senior American officials visited Africa,

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they rarely went to Kenya. In sympathy for Kenyans killed in the bombing and in appreciation for Kenya's close counterterrorism cooperation with the U.S. following the attack, significant numbers of senior American officials traveled to Nairobi. President Moi even received a long-desired invitation to the White House before he stepped down at the end of 2002. Tanzania also experienced an increase in high-level American attention.

### **A Focal Point of Terrorism**

Unfortunately, however, U.S. counterterrorism policy perspectives and programs in the region do not yet measure up to the threat Islamic fundamentalism and al-Qaida activity jointly pose. There are several reasons for this. Most of the countries have experienced severe internal conflict, which is frequently supported by neighbors, either directly or via dissident groups — which tends to lead to tit-for-tat support of an opposition group in the offending state. Examples of this phenomenon range from the long-standing civil war in Sudan and the collapse of any central authority in Somalia to Tanzanian support for the overthrow of the Idi Amin regime in Uganda, Somalia's invasion of Ethiopia in the late 1970s, Eritrea's war of independence, and the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict.

Such instability prevents most governments in the region from exercising full control over their territory, providing terrorists easy access to weapons. Somalia remains a vacuum and is prey to any terrorist with money and a plan. Although Sudan appears to be nearing the end of a civil war that dates back to 1983, it now faces a new and worsening conflict in the Darfur region, along the border with Chad. Uganda has been unable to eliminate the Lord's Resistance Army in the northern part of the country. The Somali-inhabited Ogaden in southeastern Ethiopia experiences regular security incidents. And the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement seems to have refocused attention against Eritrea, operating out of Sudan.

Although the groups behind these attacks are not normally considered international terrorists, they

engage in terrorist tactics and some, such as the EIJM, are believed to have links with al-Qaida. Recent actions by these groups illustrate conclusively that the security and intelligence services in all of the countries are underfunded and ill-equipped to counter terrorist tactics by local organizations or international terrorists.

Geography also plays an important role. Most of these states are located near, and have longstanding ties to, the Arabian Peninsula, the source of many of today's Islamic militants. It is easy to move between the Persian Gulf states and this region by air and sea. The governments are virtually incapable of monitoring the lengthy coastline from Eritrea to Tanzania. The land borders between all of the states are unusually porous, as well.

Further, the region sits on a religious fault line of Christianity, Islam and traditional African beliefs. All eight of the countries are either predominantly Muslim or have important Muslim minorities. Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia, including self-declared independent Somaliland, are heavily Muslim. Ethiopia and Eritrea are about half Islamic. Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania contain significant Muslim minorities, some of whose members have become radicalized in recent years. It is true that Sufism, which tends to resist the ideas of Islamic fundamentalists, remains strong throughout the region. This traditionally moderate form of Islam has not always been sufficient, however, to overcome the appeal of fundamentalism, especially when it is backed with funds from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. As a result, nearly all of the international terrorism in the region, as opposed to local groups that use terrorist tactics, has ties to extremist Islamic elements.

### **Poverty, Social Injustice and Political Alienation**

Finally, the region's endemic corruption is another factor that attracts terrorists, allowing them to buy off immigration and local security officials. Transparency International surveyed 133 countries in 2003 as part of its corruption perceptions index. Five of the eight countries located in the region ranked poorly. Ethiopia and Tanzania received the best ranking of the five, tied with several other countries at the 92nd position. Sudan tied with a number of countries for position 106, while Uganda tied with others for 113. Kenya, although its

standing improved from past years, tied with Indonesia at 122. (Transparency International did not rank Eritrea, Djibouti or Somalia.)

The fact that East Africa and the Horn are home to some of the poorest countries in the world, with high levels of social injustice and political alienation, is frequently cited as a reason why the region has become a breeding ground for terrorism. But not everyone agrees that poverty is closely linked to international terrorism. State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism Cofer Black, during a May digital videoconference with journalists and government officials in Dar es Salaam and Addis Ababa, downplayed the link between terrorism and poverty. He cited the Saudis who took part in the 9/11 attacks on the U.S., pointing out that they tended to come from middle-class families and had access to a university education. He concluded that they "turned into terrorists because they fell under the influence of the wrong people and became seriously misguided."

Yet while this may be true, it misses the point, at least as far as East Africa and the Horn are concerned. The environment created by poverty, social injustice and political alienation enhances the ability of religious extremists to export their philosophy and of terrorists to find local support for their nefarious acts. Black went on to say that instead of blaming economic conditions, "we need to encourage moderation" and follow guidelines "our mothers and fathers taught us." Good luck!

To be sure, poverty may not be a direct cause of terrorism. To dismiss its role, however, is misguided. Together with abysmally low wages for immigration and security personnel, poverty significantly increases the prospect of widespread corruption that, in turn, creates a climate amenable to terrorism. Even the President's National Security Strategy issued in September 2002 commented that although poverty does not make poor people into terrorists, "poverty, weak institutions and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders." In a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs* Senator Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., argued that terrorism finds sanctuary in "the misery of endemic poverty and despair." He added that "although poverty and despair do not 'cause' terrorism, they provide a fertile environment for it to prosper." In East Africa and the Horn,

## F O C U S

and probably much of the rest of the world, it is time to accept the important role that poverty plays and put in place long-term measures to deal with it.

### **Financing Terrorism**

Charities sponsored by Saudi Arabia and several other Persian Gulf states have probably financed most of the international terrorist activity in the region, with funds coming both from private individuals and governments. In the case of Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent Qatar, the charities are closely linked to efforts to promote the fundamentalist Sunni Islamic creed known popularly as Wahhabism. Toward that end, in 1962 Saudi Arabia created the state-financed Muslim World League to underwrite mosques, schools, libraries, hospitals and clinics around the world. Saudi Arabia's grand mufti, its highest religious authority, serves as the organization's president.

The League encompasses a wide range of entities, including the al-Haramain Islamic Foundation and the

International Islamic Relief Organization. These charities have been active in East Africa and the Horn for years, building mosques and implementing useful social programs. But some of their branches have also funneled money to al-Qaida and associated terrorist organizations, and the U.S. has accused the former director of al-Haramain in Tanzania of planning the 1998 attacks on the embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi.

After the 9/11 attacks, Washington stepped up pressure on Saudi Arabia to control these charities. In 2002, the two countries jointly designated the Somali branch of al-Haramain as an organization that had supported terrorist groups such as al-Qaida and the Somali-based al-Ittihad al-Islamiya. Early in 2004 both countries notified the U.N. Sanctions Committee that the branches of al-Haramain in Kenya and Tanzania provide financial, material and logistical support to al-Qaida and other terrorist organizations. They asked Kenya and Tanzania to seize the assets of both branches. At the request of the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, the

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government of Tanzania recently deported the two top al-Haramain officials and closed the office. In mid-2004 Saudi Arabia and the U.S. designated the al-Haramain branch in Ethiopia as a financier of terrorism. At the same time, under pressure from the U.S., Saudi Arabia outlined plans to dismantle its network of international charities and place their assets under a new Saudi National Commission for Relief and Charity. It remains to be seen if this crackdown by Saudi Arabia will put an end to the diversion of charitable donations to terrorists.

### **A Major Change in Policy toward Sudan**

U.S. relations with Sudan began a downward spiral after an Islamic government entrenched itself in power in the early 1990s and stepped up the war against southerners. Sudan opened the door slightly in 1996, however, when it responded positively to a U.S. request to expel Osama bin Laden, who had lived in Khartoum since 1991. This offered the possibility for improved relations, but there was no follow-through by the Clinton administration. The nadir in the relationship then occurred in 1998 following the bombing of the embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, when the U.S. launched cruise missiles against a pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum. The U.S. linked the factory to the production of chemical weapons based on a soil sample containing a precursor for the production of weapons found outside the factory. The U.S. also alleged there were ties between the factory owner and al-Qaida. Sudan strongly denied any link and a number of experts who studied the case have raised serious questions about the rationale for the attack. The Clinton administration, which had been under pressure from domestic groups to take a hard line toward Sudan, nevertheless made overtures in 2000 to Khartoum concerning possible cooperation on counterterrorism. Sudan responded positively; by the time the Bush administration took power, the scene was set for improved ties.

Following the 9/11 attacks, Khartoum quickly concluded it was in its interest to increase cooperation with the U.S. on counterterrorism. This provided the Bush administration an opportunity to advance the war on ter-

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rorism and make progress on ending the long-standing civil war in Sudan. President Bush named former Missouri Senator John Danforth as his special envoy for Sudan in an effort to end the civil war. This appointment and policy not only neutralized the American domestic constituency that wanted strong action against Sudan, but turned Sudan into an important ally in the war against terrorism.

By all accounts, the regime's cooperation on counterterrorism has been excellent. In addition, it and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, under pressure from the U.S. and others, have also made enormous progress in ending the civil war. Consequently, Secretary Powell announced in May that the U.S. had removed Sudan from a blacklist of countries deemed not to be cooperating fully on counterterrorism. There is still in place a maze of American sanctions, including the listing of Sudan as a "state sponsor" of terrorism, but this was the first step in unraveling U.S. sanctions against Sudan. The policy change probably would not have occurred except for the traumatic events of 9/11. However, a new crisis in the Darfur region in western Sudan threatens to set back significantly the improvement in relations.

### **Quandary over Somalia**

American and allied forces intervened massively in Somalia late in 1992 to end a famine. They stopped the famine, and all U.S. troops left Somalia by March 1994 following the "Blackhawk Down" episode in Mogadishu. The U.S. and international community effectively abandoned the failed state, though 9/11 and the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan briefly brought Somalia back into prominence in 2002, due to fears that the vacuum there would provide a safe haven for al-Qaida supporters being chased from Afghanistan. Some of the ideas being discussed in the government for dealing with the country were wildly off the mark, however — no surprise given the loss of expertise that occurred during the post-1994 interregnum. Fortunately, calmer minds prevailed and Washington did not do anything really stupid in Somalia.

That said, the country is still a failed state where terrorist elements can move with impunity. Somalia has

been home to al-Ittihad al-Islamiya, a fundamentalist organization that has carried out terrorist attacks against Ethiopia and is believed to have connections with al-Qaida. The U.S. added al-Ittihad in 2001 to its Comprehensive List of Terrorists and Groups. It also included the Somali money transfer organization, al-Barakat, on the list. There is evidence that an al-Qaida cell based in Mogadishu took part in the 2002 attack on an Israeli-owned hotel outside Mombasa and a simultaneous but unsuccessful attempt to shoot down an Israeli charter aircraft. At the same time, Somalis generally are not predisposed toward Islamic fundamentalism or entreaties by international terrorists. The situation in Somalia is worrisome and merits close monitoring, but it is not even close to the threat once posed by Taliban-governed Afghanistan. There appears, however, to be no agreed-upon U.S. policy for dealing with Somalia. It is long past time to adopt one.

### **A Base in Djibouti**

The U.S. embassy in Djibouti has traditionally been small and sleepy. But that changed after 9/11. The country now hosts the only U.S. military base in Africa and welcomes coalition forces from France, Germany, Spain and Italy. Some 1,800 American military and civilian personnel currently occupy a former French Foreign Legion facility at Camp Lemonier outside the capital city. Established in October 2002 and known as the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa, it is responsible for fighting terrorism in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Kenya, Somalia and Yemen, and in the coastal waters of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. CJTF-HOA's stated mission is to detect, disrupt and defeat transnational terrorist groups, to counter the re-emergence of transnational terrorism and to enhance long-term stability in the region. The establishment of the base represents a dramatic change for U.S. security policy in Africa since the closure many years ago of the Wheelus Air Force Base in Libya and Kagnew Communications Station in Ethiopia.

CJTF-HOA has devoted most of its effort so far to training with allied forces and the armies of Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya. It has conducted an impressive number of civic action programs that refurbish schools and clinics and provide medical services in the same three countries. CJTF-HOA established a temporary training facility for the Ethiopian military outside Dire

Dawa in the southeastern part of the country. Training has begun for the first of three Ethiopian anti-terrorism battalions. It is less clear how much terrorist interdiction CJTF-HOA has accomplished. Without providing details, the departing commander stated in May that they have captured "dozens of terrorists" and averted at least five terrorist attacks.

Although a good effort, the operation is not free of problems. Relations with Sudan, especially after disagreements over the new conflict in Darfur, have not improved sufficiently to engage in military cooperation. Somalia remains in too much disarray to think in terms of projects in country except for the more peaceful and self-declared independent Republic of Somaliland. The U.S. has so far been unwilling to undertake activities in Somaliland that might suggest it recognizes the country. Eritrea claims to seek cooperation with the U.S. on counterterrorism, but there have been problems translating this intention into action. There are also some operational issues. Turnover of CJTF-HOA personnel is too frequent, and area and indigenous language expertise are in short supply. American ambassadors in the region, most of whom have only dealt with a military attaché on their own staff, are still learning how to interact with an independent military commander.

### **The East Africa Counterterrorism Initiative**

After 9/11 the State Department's Office of Counterterrorism identified East Africa and the Horn, especially Djibouti, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya and Tanzania, to be at particular risk. In response, in 2003 the U.S. created a \$100 million East Africa Counterterrorism Initiative. This encompasses military training for border and coastal security, programs to strengthen control of the movement of people and goods across borders, aviation security, assistance for regional programs to curb terrorist financing, police training and an education program to counter extremist influence. There are separate programs to combat money laundering.

The major beneficiary so far of this funding has been Kenya. The U.S. is working with Kenyan officials to develop a comprehensive anti-money laundering/counterterrorist financing regime. The State Department's Terrorist Interdiction Program has established a computer system that is now operational at select airports in Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia, and is scheduled to go

online this year in Djibouti and Uganda. The TIP system provides nations with a state-of-the-art computer network that enables immigration and border control officials to identify suspects attempting to enter or leave the country. The U.S. is also funding a police development program in Tanzania, Uganda and Ethiopia, developing a training and equipment program for Kenya's law enforcement agencies, and setting up forensic laboratories in Tanzania and Uganda.

As welcome as this new assistance is, it has not stemmed complaints from countries in the region. Uganda claims it is being shortchanged because it has dealt successfully with international terrorist threats on its own. In addition, Kampala's priority is dealing with local terrorist groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army and Allied Democratic Front, while Washington is focused on international terrorists like al-Qaida. Eritrea offered the U.S. access to its port facilities and, together with Ethiopia, joined the "coalition of the willing" against Iraq. But it now finds itself frozen out of counterterrorist assistance because of U.S. concerns over the continued detention of two Eritreans employed by the American embassy and other human rights issues. Both Eritrean and Ethiopian cooperation on counterterrorism are also linked to the two countries' desire to gain favor with the U.S. on their festering border demarcation disagreement.

### **Looking Ahead**

The resources and attention devoted to counterterrorism in East Africa and the Horn are impressive but inadequate. At a House subcommittee hearing on terrorism in April, Chairman Ed Royce, R-Calif., emphasized that the U.S. needs to devote more resources for counterterrorism in Africa. He is correct. President Bush's FY 2005 international affairs budget request has as its top priority the winning of the war on terrorism. Exclusive of Iraq and Afghanistan, it requests \$5.7 billion for assistance to countries around the world that have joined the war on terrorism and another \$3.5 billion that indirectly supports the war by strengthening the U.S. ability to respond to emergencies and conflict situations. The \$100 million East Africa Counterterrorism Initiative and several other

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modest programs just don't measure up to the threat.

The components of the counterterrorism program for East Africa and the Horn are good as far as they go. But the focus is primarily short- and medium-term: catching bad guys, providing training and, to a limited extent, building up counterterrorism infrastructure. What is missing is a major, new, long-term program to reduce poverty and social alienation.

U.S. foreign assistance worldwide in constant dollars has declined about 44 percent since 1985 and another 18 percent since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Until the U.S. and the international community generally are prepared to put far more resources into improving the environment that encourages terrorism — namely poverty — it is difficult to see lasting progress against this enemy. If only the U.S. had had the foresight years ago to devote to counterterrorism and economic development the equivalent cost of overthrowing the Taliban and rebuilding a destroyed Afghanistan!

Assuming adequate financial assistance from outside, countries in the region must bear the primary responsibility for curbing terrorism. They know the different cultures, speak the local languages and control the security forces. Foreigners will never be able to function as effectively in the native environment as local nationals. Accordingly, action on the recent recommendation by the Africa Policy Advisory Panel (organized by the Center for Strategic and International Studies) for an annual \$200-million Muslim outreach initiative in Africa is long overdue.

Finally, the U.S. has allowed its language and area expertise among foreign affairs personnel to degrade to dangerous levels. The time has come to rebuild this expertise. In the case of East Africa and the Horn, there should be adequate numbers of Arabic, Somali, Swahili and Amharic speakers from State, the CIA, USAID and the military assigned to appropriate countries. Only then will the U.S. be able to engage in reliable information-gathering and increase the public affairs outreach to communities where Islamic fundamentalism and sympathy for terrorists are taking hold. ■