

The Military, Nation-Building and Counterterrorism in Africa

Issue Brief No. 191

by David Grantham

April 2016

History does not repeat itself, as the old adage goes, but it surely rhymes. What began in 2002 as an antiterrorism assistance program for a handful of impoverished African countries at risk from violent extremist groups has since expanded into the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership.



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This expensive, Department of State-led program, which is now integrated into the military's U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), boasts lackluster oversight and a penchant for nation-building — using multiple agencies to rebuild a given country's political, economic and social infrastructure. In fact, its shape and language resembles failed, Cold War anticommunism programs in Latin America that ended up complicating rather than solving American security problems.

The 2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) must take a more measured approach to the military's financial commitment to the Trans-Sahara partnerships and its counterterrorism efforts in Africa, and rethink the rules of engagement within this broadly defined "capacity-building" program.

Defeating an Ideology through Nation-Building

Despite past failures, prevailing wisdom once again says U.S. national security policies must target the ideology behind the threat in developing nations through taxpayer-funded development and modernization programs.

Are We Repeating History? The Alliance for Progress began in 1961 under the Kennedy administration as a development program for Latin America designed to thwart the spread of communism. Dwight Eisenhower, Kennedy's predecessor, authorized approximately \$400 million in military aid to help protect Latin America against an external Soviet attack. But President Kennedy envisioned a more comprehensive aid program with a social and political reform agenda aimed at preventing the ideas of communism from taking root in Latin America.

Under the Alliance for Progress, the U.S. government provided billions of dollars in economic aid, military equipment and civil assistance over the course of 10 years in the hope the funds would grow democratic institutions and undermine the appeal of communism. The U.S. government also envisioned militaries playing a vital role in national development, and provided armaments and training for those forces trying to combat communist threats (real or perceived). The program's architects essentially attempted to "immunize Latin American societies against radicalism."¹

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But the goal of modernizing Latin America proved elusive for the Kennedy administration. Income stagnated in countries that received aid and never achieved the goal of a 2.5 percent annual increase. Other barometers of success, such as literacy rates, industrial productivity and infant mortality showed little improvement. Meanwhile, the ever-present worry of losing another country to communism, as with Cuba, inspired more aggressive U.S. policies. Stopping the Soviets soon took precedence over promoting democracy or social uplift. As a result, some oppressive regimes continued to receive U.S. aid so long as they resisted communist policies.

Some Latin American leaders receiving funds diverted money and weapons intended for “hemispheric defense” to “internal security,” in order to quell challenges to their authority.² They effectively militarized development programs.³ “Rather than encourage the abandonment of authoritarian development,” scholar Thomas Field writes, “political unrest justified its adoption.”⁴ American policy blurred the lines between social progress and anticommunist strategies. Social stability policies became more concerned with Soviet influence than civic improvement. Promoting democracy took a backseat to anticommunist authoritarianism. By the program’s end in the mid-1970s, military regimes hostile to free elections and social reforms controlled 13 countries in Latin America.⁵ The Alliance for Progress and ideas of development essentially entrenched dictatorships.

A Modern Comparison. Current U.S. antiterrorism partnerships in Africa grew out of the smaller Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI) originally created for those African states deemed potential safe havens for terrorist groups linked to Al-Qaeda. The United States initially aimed to train and equip rapid-reaction counterterrorism forces for Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger; but, as with every good government venture, it expanded. In 2005, the government unveiled the partnership and brought on six more African countries, added social assistance programs and enlarged the operating budget by over 37 percent. The \$7 million-a-year initiative ballooned to \$288 million by 2013.⁶ The partnership program now aims to stamp out violent extremism through a “holistic” approach that includes military training, development assistance,

community engagement and vocational training in order, as analyst Lesley Anne Warner notes, to build “the capacity of partner nation(s).”⁷ Currently, the partnership program provides millions of dollars to 11 different African countries for programs with vague objectives like promoting tolerance and addressing inequality.

The U.S. military plays a central role in this “countering violent extremism” program. Under the partner program, the U.S. military trains local forces for combat, improves logistical capabilities, advocates intelligence sharing and provides military education opportunities for select African officials.⁸ The program often uses the secretive joint special operations air detachment in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and an unmanned aerial vehicle base in Niamey, Niger.⁹ In fact, proponents of the African partnership often point to the participation of U.S.-trained counterterrorism personnel in offensive operations against terrorist-occupied northern Mali in 2013 as a worthwhile result of the program.

“The Alliance for Progress ended up supporting dictatorships.”

Does Capacity-Building Even Work? After years of expensive economic reform initiatives, living standards have actually worsened in Africa. From 1960 to 2002, Africa received \$400 billion from various Western governments, nongovernmental agencies and

development organizations. Yet, the number of people in poverty has largely increased across the continent during the same period. The World Bank — an international governmental institution that provides loans to developing countries — provided more than \$50 billion since the early 1970s for social stability, and still most sub-Saharan African countries rank toward the bottom of the Human Development Index, which tracks a country’s well-being through the measurement of education, health and economic circumstances.¹⁰

The United States has a poor track record of capacity-building in developing countries. Most famously, the government sank nearly \$60 billion into Iraq rebuilding efforts; but \$8 billion remains unaccounted for and the Islamic State still retains control over northern portions of the country.¹¹ And, after years of development in Afghanistan, the Taliban holds more territory now than at any time since 2001.¹²

The Trans-Sahara program also assumes that promoting democratic processes will lessen the appeal of problematic ideologies, like communism or violent extremism. But even after all the money and aid that flowed into Latin America during the Alliance for Progress, socialists still held tremendous power and actually won a presidential electoral victory in Chile in 1970.

Unfortunately, democracy could usher in the radical, antidemocratic Islamist ideas that the U.S. opposes. The Muslim Brotherhood’s victory in Egypt and Hamas’ electoral achievements in Gaza, both known extremist groups, came through democratic processes. Meanwhile, as the Heritage Foundation reports, “Islamist leaders often employ short-term tactics that may fall in line with democratic processes, while maintaining a long-term strategy that seeks to weaken democracy.”¹³ Pakistan and Tunisia, for example, “have active and influential Islamist political parties, and some level of a functioning democratic process.”¹⁴ In Africa, “moderate” Islamists sympathetic to the very ideology the U.S. opposes could very well worm their way into the political process.

Capacity building and development for poorer nations as a tool against an ideology has yet to prove successful. There are simply too few examples in which nation-building has stopped the threat and built a democracy in a developing country. Indeed, when directed by foreign governments, development often leads to more centralized government power and frustrated partnerships. As one report noted, “Military hardware that improves counterterrorism capabilities may also yield access and influence” to partner-nation governments to the detriment of the local population.¹⁵ And the Alliance for Progress reminds us that failures in capacity-building often precede an expanded military presence.

Continuities between the Two Programs. Many in the Kennedy administration believed the Alliance for Progress would be the Marshall Plan for Latin America — referring to the U.S. aid program for post-World War II rebuilding efforts in Europe.¹⁶ The Kennedy administration clearly intended to nation-build.

Partner program officials, however, are more circumspect about their intentions, claiming that the

antiterrorism initiative has never been and will not become the Marshall Plan for Africa.¹⁷ Officials have tried to differentiate the program from failed development ideas of the past, but all they have done is confirm their similarities.

Both the partner program and the Kennedy Administration used the Marshall Plan to define their initiatives. However, the Marshall Plan rebuilt industrialized nations. The infrastructure necessary for reconstruction already existed in Europe, so rebuilding efforts were based on a shared familiarity with the final goal. Therefore, neither the Trans-Sahara partnerships nor the Alliance for Progress can accurately be compared to the Marshall Plan.

Instead, both programs are designed to modernize poorer nations; one admitted it and the other downplays it. Each are based on the theory that importing democratic processes, building economic infrastructure and encouraging civic tolerance will lessen the appeal of an ideology and dissuade people from joining organizations that subscribe to it. “Capacity” today is simply a euphemism for yesterday’s “development” — an idea which failed in the Alliance for Progress.

“In Africa, democracy could usher in radical, antidemocratic Islamist ideas.”

There Are Notable Differences.

The Alliance for Progress, a top-down invention of the Kennedy administration, reinforced centralized decision-making. The program lacked objective oversight, which left it susceptible to the impulses of a handful of U.S. officials. In contrast, the Trans-Sahara effort grew from the ground up, making it more flexible and more decentralized.¹⁸

President Kennedy also made clear that the military played a central role in the Alliance for Progress. But Trans-Sahara partner officials discourage a military emphasis. As one State Department official said, “the best offense against terrorism is in preventative development and political solutions, not in the projection of military power.”¹⁹ Never mind that the military accounts for a major part of the budget. After all, the diplomatic and civic development were added later to what began as strictly a counterterrorism training program. And the U.S. military already participates in other areas of the development process, such as protecting aid shipments, as

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military “enablers.”²⁰ The U.S. government is projecting military power whether the State Department believes it or not.

Also, unlike the Alliance for Progress, partnership officials employ vague language. Words like capacity, stakeholders and partnership distract from what is an otherwise “whole-of-government” development program.²¹ Language that does not agree with the actual depth and breadth of a program only obscures the actual objectives. Indeed, one 2014 report concluded that there were no “criteria of success against which performance can be measured.”²² Another report from 2015 found that many security assistance programs, like the Trans-Sahara partnership, had “specific goals...[that were] often inadequately articulated...and in some cases may actually conflict with one another.”²³

This vague language does not explicitly define the threat as Islamic extremism nor explain the preferred outcome. Is it solely to fight against the ideology of Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda affiliates, and not state sponsors of terror, like Iran? In other words, what does acceptable Islam look like? Also, questions remain as to whether the U.S. government would pull support from a partner country if “radicals” (which remains undefined) are elected to office. Speaking of local government, are there safeguards in place to protect U.S. military trainers in case their partner country decides to attack a group that the current administration does not consider “radical extremists?”

This problem is a manifestation of the Obama administration’s rudderless national security policies, to be sure. But the military cannot operate under such fluid nation-building criteria. That is a recipe for trouble, as the Alliance for Progress taught us.

The Military’s Role Will Become a Problem without Better Direction

Increased reliance on the military seems a certainty with the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) since ungoverned spaces, rampant poverty and porous borders continue to undermine stability among African partner countries. Terrorists will continue to have a pool of people from which to recruit, because those conditions will likely persist for the foreseeable future.

Not Tracking the Money Properly. Just like the centralized Alliance for Progress influenced decision making, the decentralized partner program has created problems for tracking spending and monitoring outcomes. A June 2014 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found that nearly “half of funds allocated...since 2009 have been disbursed but TSCTP program managers [were initially] unable to readily provide data on the status of funding.”²⁴ The same report also found that “TSCTP’s program managers do not routinely collect and assess data on the status of funding for the program, such as the amount of funds unobligated.”²⁵ As a result, managers lack the financial information required to measure performance and track allocation of funds.

The military, according to a separate report, has no single system for oversight. Military officials on the ground cannot effectively track weapons, training or manpower of those host country forces being funded.²⁶

“Managers lack the financial information required to measure performance.”

This problem is only compounded where local staff do not have enough manpower to handle all the extra money. One official said “I have trouble finding a partner [country] with the capacity to implement a \$10,000...let alone a \$100,000” grant.²⁷ For its part, AFRICOM has responded by developing a list of “absorptive capacity” for partner countries.²⁸ But the failure to adequately track funding could be costing the military millions of dollars.

This lack of communication and poor oversight has consequences. For example, the Pentagon has a program underway to “provide \$100 million worth of new helicopters to the Kenyan military, while State has separately pursued efforts to supply it with used helicopters.”²⁹

Unclear Rules of Engagement. The Leahy Amendment, most recently updated in 2014, prohibits the Department of Defense (DOD) from providing military assistance to governments of partnership countries identified as having committed human rights abuses. But determining exactly who represents a human rights violator under the law and how to respond to it remains entirely unclear, according to a 2013 government report.³⁰

Similarly well-intentioned thinking, but ultimately unsuccessful policies, undergirded the Alliance for

Progress. American officials recognized any support for dictators who “professed to be zealous anti-communist” would only frustrate Latin Americans and leave them “susceptible to the appeals of communism.”³¹ The Kennedy Administration set out to forgo relationships with those governments hostile to the people they governed. These initial policies, however, did not stand for long as the American government ended up providing aid to the very dictators it had hoped to avoid.

The lack of clarity in the Leahy amendment could have consequences for Defense Department personnel on the ground. It is worth noting that military forces do not have the authority to work with partner countries’ internal security groups that have arrest authority.³² Nevertheless, the line between security and military is often a foggy one in development situations.

The latest policy from the Chadian government banning the wearing of burqas is one problematic example. The Chadian government disallowed the wearing of the black, full-length covering used by Muslim women in public to hide their body and face after two suicide bombers in burqas detonated themselves in N’Djamena, Chad’s capital, in June 2015, killing more than 30 people. A useful security policy to be sure, but one that might encounter stiff resistance in some western nations on the basis of the human right to religious practices.³³ It is safe to assume that the Chadian military will begin to treat the burqa as an automatic threat during wartime and might engage the threat with force that is prohibited under U.S. military rules of engagement.

Those U.S. defense personnel operating on the ground might be held accountable for failing to properly respond to broadly defined human rights violations that they assumed were acceptable cultural policies, especially by an administration obsessed with appearances.

Recent reporting revealed that the Pentagon and State Department are at odds over assistance to Burkina Faso, which was already “singled out for using excessive force against detainees and discriminating against women.”³⁴

Solutions

Defining the threat, developing strategic rules of engagement, and finding savings within this program

are just a few solutions Congress could consider with the 2017 NDAA.

Change the Language and Define the Threat.

Americans must know exactly what their military is fighting and why. Dr. Zuhdi Jasser, founder and president of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy, says that the U.S. government needs to change the “mantra” of countering “violent extremism” to countering “violent Islamism.” This would allow us to distinguish reformers and engage with them, he argues.³⁵

Indeed, many fighters are specifically attracted to violent Islamism. One former ISIS fighter, Mothanna Abdulsatter, admitted he was won over to the group through its “intellectualism” and deep understanding of Islam, which author Michael Weiss calls ISIS’ “potent blend of Islamic hermeneutics, history, and politics.” Interestingly, Weiss compared this conversion to communism.³⁶

“Congress could require the Pentagon to perform a cost-benefit analysis.”

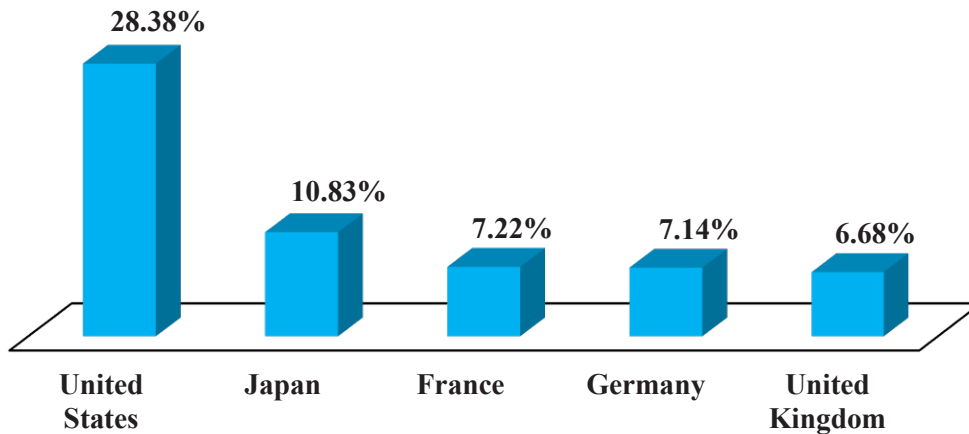
The NDAA is a place to begin changing the language by specifying the threat we face. Congress should consider fighting this word manipulation as hard as it does spending cuts because words ultimately define the mission and rules of engagement.

Military Investment Should Be

Proportional to Interests. The U.S. military investment in Africa needs to be proportional to American interests in the area, especially at a time when the armed forces face additional cuts. The U.S. government had interests in Latin America during the Alliance for Progress. American companies had approximately \$9 billion in direct investments in Latin America in 1964, which in today’s terms equals roughly \$69 billion.³⁷ Comparatively, the United States recorded somewhere between \$25 billion and \$35 billion in direct private investment for all of Africa as of 2014.³⁸ Direct investment illustrates the questionable benefits of spending billions of dollars in Defense Department funds in Africa, while cutting troop levels.

The current strategy is not “based on what we know but rather what cannot be known: the future where we don’t intervene to prevent the terrorism we think might happen.”³⁹ Instead, Congress could require the Pentagon to perform a cost-benefit analysis for the Trans-Sahara

Top Five Contributors to U.N. Peacekeeping Operations



Source: United Nations Peacekeeping, "Financing Peacekeeping." United Nations Website.

received \$60 million for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support in 2016 and grew its headquarters staff by 285 percent between 2010 and 2012.⁴⁵ That is well over \$2.5 billion to tap into.

Also, the partnership program can pull from a multitude of other appropriation accounts not subject to sequestration to fund Defense Department activity. The Peacekeeping Operations and Development Assistance accounts alone disbursed \$178 million of Trans-Sahara partnership funds from 2009 to 2013, over 50 percent of all the funds

allocated during that period.⁴⁶ Although those accounts are administered by the State Department, Congress could require more funds from these accounts be used to support military operations.

Reassign Defense Duties to International Peacekeeping Operations. From 2013-2015, the U.S. government financed 28 percent of the total U.N. peacekeeping budget; Japan was a distant second at a little over 10 percent.⁴⁷ [See the figure.]

The approved budget for 2015-2016 peacekeeping operations is \$8.27 billion.⁴⁸ And since every member country is legally obligated to pay its share as prescribed by Article 17 of the Charter of the United Nations, American taxpayers can expect to provide upward of \$2.3 billion for those programs in fiscal year 2015-2016.⁴⁹

Moreover, most of the partner countries already receive enormous support from the U.N. through its *Integrated Strategy for the Sahel* program, which the U.N. implemented in 2013 to cover areas of security, governance, development, human rights and humanitarian issues.⁵⁰

A reasonable solution here could be for the Pentagon to scale back its role in the partner program by trimming the associated funding and encouraging greater reliance on

partnership program. One measurable outcome could be "strategic access." As an example, the United States provided \$13 billion to Pakistan after 2001 to secure transit corridors used by terrorist groups to slip in and out of Afghanistan.⁴⁰ The Defense Department could justify expenditures by explaining how money facilitated tactical achievements within broader national security objectives.

Find Savings within the Different Programs. Before considering additional troop reductions in the NDAA in order to save money, Congress could find savings in the seemingly endless list of counterterrorism programs associated with the Trans-Sahara partnership. In 2015, the government authorized over \$11 billion for Pentagon security assistance programs across the world.⁴¹ The 2016 act, in particular, authorized \$100 million specifically to support national military forces in Africa. It added a one-year extension to the "building capacity of foreign security forces" programs, which was allocated more than \$344 million for 2016, according to Security Assistance Monitor.⁴²

Separately, the Overseas Contingency Operations fund (OCO) has another \$2 billion in a Counterterrorism Partnerships subfund, which acts as a fast-cash withdraw account to fund military operations.⁴³ There is a second subfund blandly titled "Operation and Maintenance," for which Congress appropriated at least \$210 million in fiscal year 2016.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, AFRICOM

U.N. initiatives and peacekeeping that already consume billions of dollars in U.S. tax revenue.

The European Union also Has a Presence. The European Union’s *Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel* is another option for Trans-Sahara engagement. Program officials said they wanted “to improve multilateral donor coordination, help identify priorities, mobilize resources, and identify the necessary expertise to address needs in the region.”⁵¹ Here again, U.S. officials have another option to rely on beyond unilateral American security assistance programs.

Dedicate Funds to a Quick Reaction Force. When Mali requested support in May 2013 to repel the advance of Al Qaeda troops on its capital, the French successfully repelled them with airstrikes on the terrorist positions in a quick and cost-effective manner. The response provides a worthwhile example of how defense spending in Africa can achieve effectiveness by returning the focus to special operations’ rapid response and mobilization capabilities with support from American air power.⁵²

More broadly, Congress could also approach Africa with a precise “identify-the-threat” mindset and dedicate Defense Department resources to defeat the threat. Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine), for example, introduced Senate bill 1632, *A Bill to Require a Regional Strategy to Address the Threat Posed by Boko Haram*, which offers a worthwhile framework for developing future counterterrorism strategies.⁵³ The proposed legislation calls for both State and Defense to submit a specific strategy for helping Nigeria and those relevant countries threatened by Boko Haram. The bill uses language similar to the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, but has more exact requirements.

Conclusion

Capacity-building is development for the 21st century. Instead of pouring money into broad, undefined capacity programs and sacrificing military readiness, the Pentagon should fund a light, quick-reaction force and coordinate assistance efforts with U.N. peacekeeping operations and other multinational agencies on the ground. That is money better spent.

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