Twenty Years After 9/11: The Threat in Africa— The New Epicenter of Global Jihadi Terror

By Tricia Bacon and Jason Warner

While Africa was scarcely a generator of jihadi violence at the dawn of the 21st century, today, 20 years after 9/11, the continent is the global epicenter of jihadi violence. Four phenomena—the persistence of al-Qa`ida affiliates, the rise of Islamic State partners, the endurance of facilitating domestic African social conditions, and ineffective counterterrorism efforts—have led to this alarming outcome. Despite the United States' desire to shift toward near-peer competition, abandoning the fight against the jihadi groups that now proliferate on the continent runs counter to U.S. interests. Jihadi violence will hinder the United States' ability to effectively compete with other great powers while also destabilizing partner nations on the continent. Indeed, retaining a commitment to countering such violence is complementary to—not in competition with—securing viable partnerships in Africa that will improve the U.S. position vis-à-vis China and Russia. Yet, clearly, the failures of the last 20 years have shown that more of the same is not acceptable: adjustments are necessary in U.S. objectives in Africa, its political to military ratio in counterterrorism efforts, its assessment of al-Qa`ida and Islamic State affiliates, its posture toward negotiations, and its integration of great power politics and counterterrorism goals.

The metrics are grim. In 2020, over 13,000 people were killed in nearly 5,000 acts of violence. Seventeen designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations affected at least 22 countries.[a] Such statistics might well be expected to come from South Asia (Afghanistan or Pakistan) or the Middle East (Iraq and Syria), regions that have historically served as the central locations of violence from salafi-jihadi groups linked to al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State. Instead, these statistics reflect the current state of jihadism on the African continent. Once a theater seen by many as peripheral, the continent has emerged as the new center of gravity for jihadism.

The presumed marginality of Africa in U.S. national considerations—the continent having long been considered a "backwater" in the United States' security calculus[1]—ceased to hold at the beginning of the U.S.-led "Global War on Terror." As counterterrorism became the United States' top national security priority, post-2001, fighting terrorism came to define U.S. relationships with African governments. Specifically, U.S.-led efforts initially sought to stymie the ability of international jihadis, presumed to be fleeing from Afghanistan, to exploit the "under-governed" spaces in Africa to serve as havens for their activities.[2] This new U.S. outlook spurred a flurry of new initiatives. In the Sahel, in 2002, the United States launched the Pan-Sahel Initiative, intended to train and equip six company-sized partner nation rapid-reaction counterterrorism forces—three in Mali and one each in Chad, Mauritania, and Niger—with the goal of enhancing regional cooperation, securing borders, tracking terrorist groups' movement, and deterring the establishment of jihadi terrorist safe havens in the Sahel.[3] Driven by a similar concern on the other side of the continent, the United States erected its first and only permanent military base on the continent in Djibouti in 2002. In 2003, it then initiated the East Africa Counterterrorism Initiative, which focused on improving police and judicial counterterrorism capabilities in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda.[4] Both initiatives grew in size and scope over time.

Reality proved that the U.S. focus on preventing the migration of terrorists to Africa was a miscalculation. Rather than global jihadis fleeing Afghanistan and finding haven in Africa, instead locally minded Islamist and jihadi groups began to coalesce and proliferate within Africa, eventually entering the orbit of al-Qa`ida and later the Islamic State. This reality led to a U.S. reconceptualization of the counterterrorism challenge it faced: it began a shift away from seeing Africa as primarily a haven for non-African jihadis and instead, toward countering homegrown, African jihadi groups in their own right. By 2007, the U.S. Department of Defense stood up its own combatant command for the continent, Africa Command (AFRICOM), which, though based in Germany, was a recognition of

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a   The designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations are: Gama'a al-Islamiyya, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Shabaab, Ansar al-Dine, Boko Haram, Ansaru, al-Mulathamun Battalion (AMB), Ansar al-Shari'a in Benghazi, Ansar al-Shari'a in Darnah, Ansar al-Shari'a in Tunisia, ISIL-Sinai Province (formerly Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's Branch in Libya, ISIS-West Africa, ISIS-Greater Sahara, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, ISIS-DRC, and ISIS-Mozambique. This list uses the spellings and names as they appear on "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Counterterrorism, accessed August 9, 2021.

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"the growing strategic importance of Africa" and the need to develop enduring partnerships on the continent.[5] By 2019, the number of U.S. military personnel on the continent had more than doubled from 2008,[6] and the number of military exercises, programs, and engagements there had risen dramatically.[7] As of August 2021, the United States has approximately 5,100 U.S. service members and about 1,000 Defense Department civilians and contractors in AFRICOM's 15 'enduring' bases and 12 less-permanent 'non-enduring' or 'contingency' bases.[8] The majority of U.S. forces are located in Djibouti with an additional 2,000 soldiers conducting training missions in some 40 countries around the continent.[9]

However, beginning in 2018, another re-posturing was under way. With the 2018 release of the U.S. National Defense Strategy, the Department of Defense articulated that "Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security."[10] Competing with so-called "great powers" or "near-peer competitors," namely China and Russia, became the new U.S. priority, not the threats posed by al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State. That proclamation proved to be actionable on the continent. In December 2020, the United States declared that it would move all of its troops out of Somalia[11]—there to train, advise, and assist in the effort against al-Shabaab—a move emblematic of the broader zeitgeist of fatigue with "forever wars" motivated by counterterrorism in Iraq but especially Afghanistan. France has conveyed a similar weariness: in July 2021, it announced that it would scale back its Barkhane counterterrorism mission in the Sahel.[12] But as priorities shift 20 years after 9/11, have U.S. and international efforts against African jihadi actors been effective?

To the contrary. Twenty years after 9/11, jihadi violence on the African continent has experienced a meteoric rise, putting African civilians, African states, as well as U.S. and especially partner interests on the continent in far greater danger than before September 11th. Despite the efforts to minimize jihadi violence, 20 years after 9/11, the African continent is the new leading epicenter of jihadi terrorism in the world today. Alarmingly, the jihadi threat in Africa has not merely worsened: it has reached historically unprecedented levels at the same time that the United States and its partners' appetite to counter it has waned, creating a perfect storm for the situation to further deteriorate. Even as the U.S. posture shifts away from combating jihadi terrorism in Africa, the authors argue that the United States and international community cannot turn their attention from the dire situation. And yet, more of the same is clearly not the solution.

This article proceeds in four main sections. In the first section, the authors outline how, 20 years after 9/11, the prevalence of violence from African jihadi groups has risen dramatically to never-before-seen levels. In the second section, they highlight four interconnected phenomena underpinning the rise of jihadi violence on the continent and discuss why these factors will persist. The third section makes the argument about why the United States should care about the growing jihadi threat in Africa. The authors conclude in the fourth section by proposing policy changes to countering jihadism and the threat it poses within Africa.

The New Epicenter of Jihadi Terror

The prevalence of jihadi violence on the African continent has spiked dramatically in the 20 years since the Global War on Terror began.[13] To be sure, Africa was no stranger to jihadism during the 1990s. For its part, Sudan played host to Usama bin Ladin from

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1991 to 1996, where he lived after his fallout with the Saudi royal family. Egyptian jihadis, most notably Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Ladin's future deputy and successor, joined bin Ladin in Sudan to launch a campaign against Egypt.[14] Nearby, al-Qa`ida had trained Somali militants in the early 1990s and encouraged them to target the U.S. presence during Operation Restore Hope, the U.S.-led and U.N.-backed humanitarian-focused security mission in 1992-1993.[15] Most notably, in 1998, al-Qa`ida orchestrated dual bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salam, Tanzania, collectively killing 224 (of which 12 were Americans).[16] And, for its part, Algeria was the site of a bloody campaign by jihadis against the state throughout the 1990s. However, by the end of the 1990s, things had quieted, relatively. With bin Ladin's departure, much of al-Qa`ida had moved to Afghanistan, and the Egyptian and Algerian governments had made major gains against their jihadi adversaries. To that end, in 2000, the year before 9/11, the U.S. State Department did not include any jihadi attacks in Africa among its list of "Significant Terrorist Incidents."[17][b]

Fast forward 20 years, and the story has changed drastically: jihadi violence in Africa has seen a profound rise, particularly in the past decade. According to ACLED, 2020 saw 4,958 violent attacks perpetrated by African jihadi actors.[18] In the last decade alone, jihadi violence on the continent has increased 17-fold: the 4,958 violent events in 2020 stand in stark contrast to "only" 288 violent jihadi events in 2009 according to ACLED.[19] A rise in attacks has led to a concurrent rise in deaths. African jihadi groups were responsible for an estimated 13,059 deaths in 2020 alone.[20] These occurred primarily across five major theaters of instability: Lake Chad, the Sahel, Egypt, Somalia, and Mozambique.[21] Twenty-two African countries—nearly half of the continent—now faces violence from jihadi groups.[22]

This profound rise in jihadi violence over the past 20—but especially past 10—years has catapulted the continent into the

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b   While the State Department opted not to highlight any jihadi incidents in Africa, an inclusive approach to counting jihadi attacks in the Global Terrorism Database points to approximately 83 such attacks, mostly in Algeria.

Al-Qa`ida-linked al-Shabaab recruits walk down a street on March 5, 2012, in the Deniile district of Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, following their graduation. (Mohamed Abdiwahab/AFP via Getty Images)

new global epicenter of jihadi violence, a lamentable position that has become clear 20 years after 9/11. For its part, START's 2020 overview on the state of global terrorism underscored that seven of the 10 countries with the greatest increases in terrorism in 2019 were in Africa. In the same year, the continent had the second highest number of terrorism-related deaths in the world, following only South Asia.[23] Yet the arrival of the African continent as the greatest global generator of jihadi violence arguably came in the summer of 2021. In June 2021, the Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State surprised those not paying attention by declaring Africa as the new global priority region in which to combat the Islamic State; it proposed the creation of a new task force to combat Islamic State groups there and emphasized the importance of bringing in new African members into the anti-Islamic State coalition.[24] The next month, July 2021, saw the African Center for Strategic Studies note that the past year over year review of violence by African Islamist groups showed an unprecedented, record-setting level of violence.[25] Furthermore, later that month, the U.N. team charged with monitoring the global jihadi threat found—in what it called "the most striking development of the period under review"—that during the first half of 2021, the African continent was the world region most afflicted by jihadi terrorism, with the greatest number of global casualties caused by U.N.-designated jihadi groups.[26]

Four Reasons for the Surge of Jihadi Violence and Why it Will Persist

What factors caused violence to proliferate so dramatically over the past 20 years? Most of all, domestic social conditions on the continent led to the rise of jihadism and helped al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State to become entrenched. The presence of groups allied with al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State simultaneously ensured that the United States and global partners were concerned about threats on the continent, while also leading to "jihadi myopia" by global policymakers. While local African insurgencies' links to global jihadi organizations are important, focusing on them led to overly securitized counterterrorism policies, which have failed to mitigate—and arguably even contributed to—the precipitous rise of violence evidenced on the continent today. The piece now explores in more detail four factors that have contributed to the rising jihadi threat in Africa.

1. Al-Qa`ida: A Durable and Pernicious Presence
The first factor that contributed to the surge in violence in Africa was al-Qa`ida's implantation and recruitment of affiliates in the East, North, and Sahel. The affiliates have provided the global jihadi group with a capable and enduring presence on the African continent. At various points, al-Qa`ida has provided its formal and informal affiliates in Africa with guidance, reputational cachet, and resources; importantly, however, such assistance from al-

Qa`ida core has not been central to its African affiliates' longevity. Instead, their resilience primarily comes from their effectiveness at exploiting local and regional conditions.

Al-Qa`ida was no stranger to Africa before 2001. It was al-Qa`ida's most important hub in the 1990s: as noted, the group enjoyed safe haven in Sudan, trained local militants in Somalia, and conducted its first major operation in the simultaneous bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. However, by 2001, al-Qa`ida's presence in Africa had dwindled to encompass only a residual network in the Horn. While it retained businesses in Sudan and a network of veteran local operatives in East Africa, by this point, much of the organization was already ensconced in Afghanistan.[27] Nonetheless, al-Qa`ida still had enough reach on the continent post-9/11 to orchestrate attacks in Djerba, Tunisia, in April 2002 and Mombasa, Kenya, in November 2002, and to support one in Casablanca, Morocco, in May 2003.[28]

Several years later, al-Qa`ida fully reasserted its presence on the continent by cultivating formal affiliate alliances with existing jihadi groups. One of the groups involved in the insurgency in Algeria during the 1990s, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), became al-Qa`ida's official branch in North Africa, renaming itself to al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007. In Somalia, al-Shabaab privately gained affiliate status in 2010 and then was publicly acknowledged as al-Qa`ida's official branch in East Africa in 2012, though did not adopt an "al-Qaeda" tag in its name.[29] Later, and through AQIM, al-Qa`ida strengthened its presence in the Sahel in 2017 with the formation of JNIM, a merger of four local jihadi groups, which declared fealty to al-Qa`ida.[30]

Over time, al-Qa`ida core has offered its African branches guidance on governance, strategy, and targeting, as well as advice on managing counterterrorism pressure.[31] And even though al-Qa`ida's affiliates in Africa have not always heeded its counsel—most notably in terms of limiting the deaths of fellow Muslims[32]—their alliances have been sustained despite challenges posed by domestic and international counterterrorism pressures, leadership losses, and the rise of a rival in the Islamic State.

Al-Qa`ida's East African affiliate, al-Shabaab, is one major reason for the rising jihadi violence in Africa writ large. Not only is al-Shabaab al-Qa`ida's strongest global affiliate, it is the most dynamic militant group on the continent. Indeed, despite 15 years of international military pressure and investment in the Somali government (including in both cases by the United States), al-Shabaab has consistently conducted the most attacks each year of any jihadi group in Africa.[33] Part insurgent group, part terrorist organization, part shadow government, and part mafia, al-Shabaab effectively combines provisionary and punitive governance to regularly outperform the Somali government. On the provisionary side, it provides harsh but relatively predictable order in the areas it controls and justice through its shadow governance in areas it does not directly control. In contrast, the government is at best absent and at worst unpredictable and predatory. Even people residing outside of al-Shabaab's territory choose to use its judicial system and its roads. Its courts have a reputation for being more efficient, effective, and fair than the government's.[34] At its checkpoints, the group charges set tolls and provides receipts, while government checkpoints charge arbitrary amounts at multiple points on the same road.[35] On the punitive front, its extortion racket is coercive and widely resented, but it extracts funds from all sectors of the

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economy, giving the group reach throughout southern Somalia and a budgetary surplus.[36] In addition to its military and governance "successes" in Somalia, al-Shabaab has a robust and increasingly capable wing in Kenya.[37]

On the other side of the continent, before the GSPC became AQIM, the former group was on life support. Many members had accepted Algerian government amnesties after years of brutal violence, and interest was low for others to join to replace GSPC's defecting members.[38] But affiliation with al-Qa`ida helped breathe new life into the organization.[39] By becoming an al-Qa`ida affiliate, the former GSPC gained greater recruitment appeal and expanded its targets and tactical profile.[40] Its success would also lead it to becoming a force multiplier for other jihadis; AQIM, for instance, provided training to Boko Haram.[41] Over time, AQIM increasingly moved out of Algeria and southward, into the Sahel, where it forged ties and enhanced the capability of local jihadis, culminating in a jihadi takeover in northern Mali in 2012. The resultant French intervention led AQIM-affiliated jihadis to scatter throughout the region, eventually leading to a reconstitution and subsequent alliance of several local jihadi groups, with AQIM support, to form JNIM, which pledged allegiance to al-Qa`ida, in 2017.[42] Since then, JNIM has effectively leveraged ethnic and communal tensions and Sahelian government inefficiencies to embed into society, including exploiting criminal networks.[43] The results are clear: violence in the region has grown exponentially each year since 2017. While violence by JNIM is currently centered in Mali and Niger, it has expanded as a threat to states previously unaffected by jihadism prior to 9/11, to include most notably Burkina Faso, but also Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire.[44]

Though these groups—AQIM, al-Shabaab, and JNIM—are fundamental generators of the violence currently seen in Africa, it is important to emphasize that their al-Qa`ida affiliations do not define them. Rather, local conditions have been more central to their resilience than their connections with al-Qa`ida. For those seeking to combat these groups, their al-Qa`ida affiliations have proven a double-edged sword. On the one hand, these groups' relationships with al-Qa`ida have been precisely the links that mobilized international resources to counter these organizations; in the absence of links to al-Qa`ida, they may have received little attention. On the other hand, in emphasizing these three groups' existence as part of the broader al-Qa`ida orbit, national governments and regional and global powers have responded with overly securitized approaches. Over time, such kinetic counterterrorism measures

have produced significant tactical gains, eliminating key leaders and reducing groups' territorial holdings. Yet, 20 years after 9/11, al-Qa`ida's affiliates remain deeply entrenched and their alliances with al-Qa`ida have persisted despite adversity. Now, they have received a morale and ideological boost from the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan; after all, al-Qaida's affiliates swear *bay`a* to the Taliban's leader as well as al-Qaida's.[45] Going forward, they will remain capable of inflicting significant levels of violence in the Sahel and East Africa, while even their affiliation with al-Qa`ida may not be enough for international governments to continue investing in efforts to counter them.

2. The Emergence and Spread of the Islamic State

While al-Qa`ida set the stage for the long durée of jihadism on the continent, in the past seven years, the Islamic State has taken up the mantle.

Islamic State Central has actively worked to stand up, create, and support various regional groupings (which it grandiosely calls "provinces") around the continent, whose members carry out violence in its name. Beginning in 2014, jihadi insurgent groups around the continent began pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State, becoming new *wilayat,* or provinces, of the Islamic State in Africa. While each province undertook Islamic State-approved activities—violence against their adversaries and varying degrees of attempts at governance and territorial control—one unifying theme was their mutual commitment to the ideals, at least ostensibly, of a global caliphate.

As of September 2021, the Islamic State boasts six official African provinces. These are found in Libya (created in 2014), Algeria (2014), Sinai (2014), West Africa (2015), Somalia (2018), and Central Africa (2019). However, because the West Africa Province has two "wings"—one in the Lake Chad Basin (ISWAP-Lake Chad) and one in the Sahel (ISWAP-Greater Sahara)—as does the Central Africa Province—with "wings" in Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo—the Islamic State has touchpoints in at least eight African locations.[46] In addition to these formal provinces, the Islamic State has supporters around the continent who, though not part of official Islamic State provinces, have undertaken attacks in its name in places ranging from Tunisia to Morocco to Kenya to South Africa. The Islamic State's six formal provinces (or eight branches) reflect its critical role in the proliferation of African jihadism in the post-9/11 period.[47] Underscoring how important an area of operations Africa has become for the Islamic State, an estimated 41 percent of all global deaths inflicted by Islamic State militants in 2019 occurred in Africa.[48]

Beyond the mere creation of administrative units on the continent—which broadly parallel al-Qa`ida's affiliates—Islamic State Central has, to varying degrees, provided its African provinces various types of support that have served to generate and exacerbate violence. In the case of its Libya province, the Islamic State sent emissaries from Iraq to help locals and returned foreign fighters to stand up its branch there,[49] offering them blueprints for governance, some financial transfers, and advice on strategy and tactics. Similarly, Islamic State Central has facilitated financial transfers to the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP-Lake Chad),[50] Somalia,[51] and Central Africa (DRC).[52] In Sinai, financial transfers and weapons transfers came from Islamic State Central.[53] The Islamic State has also offered advice to its provinces, giving guidance on strategy and tactics (ISWAP-Lake Chad),[54] reconciling with its rivals (ISWAP-Lake Chad),[55] or standing up to them (ISWAP-

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Greater Sahara).[56] It has encouraged foreign fighters to come to different regions of the continent (for example, Libya),[57] and has highlighted attacks by its provinces on the African continent in its media releases.[58] Its advice has often been heeded, and when it is ignored, it usually has been done diplomatically. While there have been no notable instances of public dissent about Islamic State Central's directives from its African provinces, cases have arisen where its provinces have been non-obedient: most notable was the tendency of Abubakar Shekau, the one-time leader of ISWAP, to continue using child suicide bombers against Islamic State Central's demands.[59] However, directives of Islamic State Central—beyond requirements for all media to be centrally released by the Islamic State[60]—have not been particularly demanding. Indeed, most of the successes of the African Islamic State provinces (the early days in Libya being an exception) have been more a product of their own making than because of the guidance or assistance of Islamic State Central.[61]

Arguably more important than directed assistance from Islamic State Central has been the informal changes that have come about as a result of its emergence. While assistance from Islamic State Central tended to be ad hoc and infrequent, simply by becoming provinces, groups often adopted the informal "norms" of the Islamic State. Most notably, provinces engaged in new, often more brutal tactics, like beheadings[62] and suicide bombings,[63] carried out prison raids as advocated by the Islamic State,[64] attempted to govern and hold territory,[65] and encouraged sectarian tensions.[66] Thus, even when not aided directly in these pursuits by Islamic State Central, its African provinces' desire to more closely resemble the Islamic State Central of its heyday in 2014-2017 led to their perpetuation of its *modus operandi*.

Beyond the hierarchical role that Islamic State Central plays, the existence of this network of provinces has created a lateral support system between the Islamic State's regional branches that has facilitated increased violence. Its African provinces have waged propaganda campaigns to encourage other insurgent groups to pledge *bay`a*,[67] facilitated others' pledges of *bay`a*,[68] and provided training for one another.[69] At Islamic State Central's request, some of its provinces oversee other provinces (Somalia over Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), for example),[70] and members have traveled between provinces.[71] Indeed, even as Islamic State Central's own global fortunes declined further in 2019 with the loss of its last territory in Syria and the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, its African provinces actually increased their violence, with new provinces emerging and others undertaking retaliatory violence in the name of Islamic State Central, not least due to these mutual support systems.[72] In looking to the future, the salafi-jihadi violence that currently proliferates on the African continent shows no signs of abating, not least because of the mutual support provided by

these networks.

3. Salience of Jihadi Narratives in the Face of Domestic African Challenges

Above all, local social, political, and economic dynamics within African states have created the void that jihadi actors have exploited post-9/11, and these conditions show no signs of improving. Without the failures of African states, al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State would not have found such viable partners in these states' citizens. Lack of economic opportunity; ethnic, tribal, and religious grievances; as well as unresponsive state structures have allowed groups affiliated with al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State to co-opt local social and political networks, leveraging jihadi narratives to speak to local societal grievances, and in many cases, establish legitimacy among local populations that rival states themselves.[73]

Across sub-Saharan Africa, nearly every second person lives in poverty, due to a combination of poor macroeconomic policy,[74] corruption,[75] and lack of external investment,[76] among other factors. Jihadi groups have capitalized on the lack of economic opportunities in the region to outbid governments and other rival jihadi groups. One group that has been particularly adept at exploiting such grievances has been ISWAP-Lake Chad. Indeed, given that about 40 percent of Nigeria's population lives in poverty[77]—the areas of its conflict-ridden north and northeast being the poorest—ISWAP sought to govern in ways that leave local civilians economically better off under its control compared to its now significantly weakened rival,[78] "Boko Haram," in addition, more importantly, to outperforming the Nigerian state in some ways.[79] In contrast to government extortion, cargo seizures, and crackdowns on trade,[80] ISWAP's taxation of goods is generally accepted by civilians. Some of the population in the Lake Chad area even credit ISWAP with fostering a better environment for business, primarily in the trade of rice, fish, and dried pepper.[81] Furthermore, while rival "Boko Haram's" methods of generating funds have been opaque and exploitative,[82] ISWAP's collection of *zakat* (religious taxes on the wealthy to distribute to the poor) are collected systematically. And the results are lucrative: ISWAP claimed its "Zakat Office" collected about $157,000 during Ramadan and the month prior in the Islamic State's May 2021 Al Naba bulletin. Besides the financial benefit for the group, the collection of *zakat* "allows ISWAP to present themselves as justice-minded Muslims to a majority-Muslim local population."[83]

Throughout Africa, inter-communal ethnic violence has long inflamed tensions and undermined security. In the past two decades, al-Qa`ida- and Islamic State-affiliated groups have exploited such grievances. Perhaps most notably, ISWAP-Greater Sahara has taken advantage of conflicts between Fulani and Tuaregs in the Mali-Niger border area, primarily targeting Tuaregs in several attacks on civilians in 2017 and 2018.[84] On top of capitalizing on long-standing grievances between Fulani herders and Dogon farmers in central Mali, JNIM members have also acted as mediators in local conflicts,[85] increasing their clout among certain communities. Jihadi leaders have taken up the mantle of mobilizing adherents across tribal, ethnic, and racial cleavages by employing jihadi rhetoric to preach unity among Muslims against common threats.[86] Most notably, JNIM leader Iyad Ag Ghali, a prominent leader of the Tuareg rebellion in 2012, departed from earlier tradition and called for all Muslims in northern Mali—whether Tuareg, Arab, Fulani, Songhai, or Bambara—to fight against "Western crusaders" and their local allies.[87] By utilizing existing local conflicts in the Sahel,

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ISWAP-Greater Sahara and JNIM are able to tap into a steady supply of individuals ready to take up arms against rival groups or government forces.[88]

Jihadi groups have also exploited states' unresponsiveness and dysfunction, often serving as viable fill-ins when African states cannot or will not provide social services required of a state to their citizens. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in Somalia, where decades of international efforts to erect a viable central government are as fragile as ever, and where, in such an absence, al-Shabaab has filled in. Rather than prioritizing efforts to provide services to the population (or combating al-Shabaab, which is working to offer such services), the Somali Federal Government has recently been preoccupied by infighting with Federal Member States, strife that erupted into armed clashes on the street of Mogadishu earlier this year.[89] Meanwhile, al-Shabaab has erected a shadow government with reach throughout most of southern Somalia that outperforms the government, especially in dispute resolution and the provision of a semblance of order.[90] Indeed, the scholar Mohamed Haji Ingiriis went so far as to say that "Insecurity under al-Shabaab is far better than security under the federal government."[91]

Another example of jihadis' exploitation of unresponsive state structures occurred in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The Islamic State exploited the security vacuum in Libya after the fall of the Qaddafi regime, briefly carving out control over some coastal cities, especially Sirte, in 2014.[92] The looting of state arsenals also provided an abundant supply of weapons that destabilized the Sahel in the following years,[93] when young Tuareg revolutionaries—some who had returned from Libya after Gaddafi's fall in 2011—joined the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad[94] and laid the foundations for the 2012 Tuareg rebellion in Mali.[95] This dynamic of weak state structures facilitating the transnational movement of arms and ideas is not new, but it is particularly salient in a region where population groups often enjoy closer ties across state borders than to their own governments in distant capitals.[96]

While the above examples highlight specific economic, communal, and state vulnerabilities, the reality on the ground is much more fluid: the proliferation of jihadi violence on the continent has grown precisely because of groups' abilities to manipulate a wide array of local issues to advance their goals. It is an intersection of global, local, and individual level factors that have all contributed to the "wildfire of terrorism" that is, according to the commander of United States Africa Command General Stephen

Townsend, now sweeping across Africa.[97] These enabling conditions show few signs of improving and may deteriorate further. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to erode some of the gains in economic and human development of the past decades.[98] As governments in Africa face yet another wave of COVID-19 with less than three percent of the population vaccinated,[99] jihadi groups will have further opportunity to exploit economic hardship, existing grievances, and lackluster institutional responses.

4. Ineffective Counterterrorism Approaches

The fourth phenomenon contributing to rise of terrorism on the continent has arguably been the rise in efforts to combat it: Africa is, in some ways, worse for the fix.

To combat jihadi threats on the continent, the United States has conducted some airstrikes and special operations missions, most notably in Somalia and Libya. However, more often it has worked to counter African jihadi groups by supporting other countries' military interventions and participating in training, advising, and equipping missions that have sometimes escalated into direct U.S. interventions.[100]

Overall, direct Western interventions have produced numerous tactical accomplishments. France's Operation Serval in the Sahel helped roll back jihadis' gains in Mali and subsequent operations from its Operation Barkhane eliminated AQIM's leader and senior JNIM figures.[101] In East Africa, U.S. airstrikes and special operations in Somalia killed some of the most veteran and capable attack planners in Somalia, including East African al-Qa`ida operatives and several of al-Shabaab's founding leaders.[102] In Libya, U.S. airstrikes were instrumental in dislodging the Islamic State from its stronghold in Sirte in December 2016.[103] Unfortunately, despite these accomplishments, in both Mali and Somalia, there has been little, if any, long-term strategic progress against al-Qa`ida- or Islamic State-affiliated groups, the Libya example arguably notwithstanding.[104] Moreover, while some military pressure is essential, the limitations of such action in the absence of political and governance improvements have become clear. Unfortunately, that realization has come as international forces have grown weary of such military commitments, especially in light of changing national security priorities.

Though direct kinetic actions receive the most headlines, they have not actually been the centerpiece of the U.S.-led counterterrorism effort in Africa.[c] Rather, the post-9/11 diagnosis that "under-governed" spaces in Africa could lead to the growth of jihadi threats produced a U.S.-led effort to build African governments' counterterrorism capacity, such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership and the Partnership for Regional East Africa Counterterrorism.[d] Such efforts, initiated before the threat had metastasized in either region, were intended to build local capability to prevent and counter the threat. On this score, U.S.-led counterterrorism efforts have clearly fallen short, for five

> **"Rather than treating jihadism as a complex combination of transnational affiliations and local drivers, capacity building efforts focused on the former, resulting in an emphasis on building security and military capability. But this investment was not matched by effective capacity building to improve governance and address underlying grievances. In other words, capacity building may have built some local government capacity to _fight_ jihadism but not to address what _fueled_ it."**

main reasons.

First, the West's investment was insufficient given the scale of the need. Africa—and the numerous regions and countries that the continent contains—has not been the top priority in the U.S.-led counterterrorism campaign, falling well behind the Middle East and South Asia in terms of attention and investment.[e] For example, the U.S. military spends less than one percent, a mere 0.3 percent to be precise, of its budget on Africa.[105] Yet the shortfalls in Africa were equally, if not more, acute and the spread of jihadism on the continent has rivaled and now surpasses conditions in the two aforementioned regions.[106]

Second, U.S.-led counterterrorism capacity building approaches have been too greatly shaped by groups' al-Qa`ida or Islamic State affiliations. Rather than treating jihadism as a complex combination of transnational affiliations and local drivers, capacity building efforts focused on the former, resulting in an emphasis on building security and military capability. But this investment was not matched by effective capacity building to improve governance and address underlying grievances. In other words, capacity building may have built some local government capacity to _fight_ jihadism but not to address what _fueled_ it.[f] For example, the 2002 Pan-Sahel Initiative focused on building military capability of the four Sahelian countries, driven by concerns that these "under-governed spaces" could become a safe haven. Though the Trans-Sahara

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c   Of note, the authors are looking specifically at counterterrorism engagement in this article. In terms of broader U.S. engagement, the Congressional Research Service reports that "assistance to Africa primarily focuses on addressing health challenges, notably relating to HIV/AIDS, malaria, maternal and child health, and nutrition." _Sub-Saharan Africa: Key Issues and U.S. Engagement_ (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2021), p. 15.

d   These were successor programs to the Pan-Sahel Initiative and the East Africa Counterterrorism Initiative, respectively.

e   For example, in the 2011 U.S. counterterrorism strategy, East Africa and the Sahel/Maghreb were listed as the fourth and seventh priorities, respectively, in the Areas of Focus section. The 2018 U.S. CT strategy references Africa only once in the document, though it also flags Boko Haram as a "radical Islamist terror group."

f   Admittedly, as the Congressional Research Service noted, "comprehensive regional or country-level breakouts of U.S. assistance are not routinely made publicly available in budget documents, complicating estimates of U.S. aid to the region." _U.S. Assistance to sub-Saharan Africa_ (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2020), Summary and pp. 8-9. Thus, it is hard to directly compare funding levels for military/security versus prevention in efforts to counter jihadism. Nonetheless, given the proliferation of jihadism, the efficacy of prevention efforts, specifically the lack thereof, is clear.

Ivorian soldiers take part in the inauguration of the International Academy for Combating Terrorism (AILCT) in Jacqueville, Ivory Coast, on June 10, 2021. (Issouf Sanogo/AFP via Getty Images)

Counterterrorism Partnership had a more expansive mission, in Mali—which would prove to be the linchpin in the region for jihadi growth—more than half of the spending was on military projects.[107] More to the point, these years of investment did not prevent the subsequent jihadi takeover and insurgency in Mali.

Third, some capacity-building resources went to local partners that were opportunistic, predatory, and corrupt, and thereby produced limited, if any, improvements in governance on the ground. Some African leaders self-servingly saw the United States' counterterrorism focus as a means to secure their power or stifle opposition. In addition, being a "good" African counterterrorism partner—i.e., being willing to target or detain suspected terrorists—allowed African governments to enjoy strong bilateral relationships with the United States while sidestepping democracy and human rights concerns. For instance, the abuses wrought by Algeria's notoriously brutal counterinsurgency campaign in the 1990s were overlooked immediately after 9/11 as the country became hailed as a regional bulwark against jihadism.[108] Furthermore, African governments perceived to be "good" U.S. counterterrorism partners have had little incentive to reform or improve governance, and some of their actions taken in the name of counterterrorism actually exacerbated radicalization.[109] In a 2020 report, the United Nations Mission in Mali accused Malian and Nigerien troops of scores of extrajudicial killings.[110] In 2015, Amnesty International reported that the Nigerian military had arrested at least 20,000 young men since 2009, arbitrarily or in mass 'screening' operations.[111] In the 2014 Operation Usalama Watch, Kenyan security forces arrested and relocated thousands of Somalis, exacerbating grievances al-Shabaab used to recruit.[112] Finally, in Mozambique, where the Islamic State is touting its newest affiliate, some local youths have joined the insurgency in response to abuses by security forces.[113]

Fourth, capacity building did not produce the desired results

because some local governments simply did not share the West's view that combating jihadism was their number one concern. In fact, many of the African governments that the United States has assisted would not have placed combating jihadism at the top of their domestic agendas absent U.S. pressure. From their perspective, myriad other security, health, and governance concerns were deemed equally, if not more, pressing. While they sought and accepted assistance to combat jihadism, their true priorities lay elsewhere. For example, in the years after 9/11, the Malian government was more concerned about further Tuareg unrest in the north than the GSPC's activities there, which consisted primarily of smuggling.[114]

Finally, the U.S.-led diagnosis that expanding the reach of central African governments into contested areas was the best solution to "under-governed" spaces[g] had drawbacks. The United States and other international actors emphasized building central governments' capacities to expand their writ, but central governments were not necessarily well positioned to counter the rise of jihadism in those places. A greater central government presence sometimes meant the extension of corrupt, oppressive, or predatory actors into already disenfranchised communities. Building central governments' capacity to expand their writ often meant increasing their security apparatuses in places that had been "under-governed" at least in part because of center-periphery tensions.[115] Rather than communities welcoming a greater central government presence, they sometimes saw the increase in security forces as encroachment

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g   For example, the 2003 U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy commits that "The United States will work in concert with our international and regional partners to ensure effective governance over ungoverned territory, which could provide sanctuary to terrorists." "National Strategy for Combating Terrorism," The White House, February 2003, p. 22.

"Given the exponential increase in the threat from jihadis in Africa, it is clear that counterterrorism measures to date have been, at best, insufficient."

by a rival ethnic, tribal, or religious group. Building on the previous discussion on northern Mali, the limited central government presence there was the result of the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s, and the exertion of greater central government authority in the name of counterterrorism reactivated suspicions of the central government among Tuareg communities, especially in light of their perception that the Malian government had under-invested in public services.[116] In Kenya, an increased security presence in the predominantly Muslim coastal areas of the country fueled grievances about mistreatment by the "Christian" government. For example, in 2012 and 2013, riots broke out in Mombasa after the killings of radical clerics suspected of supporting al-Shabaab.[117] The clerics' supporters saw the Kenyan police as being behind their deaths, while a Kenyan government task force could not establish culpability.[118]

Given the exponential increase in the threat from jihadis in Africa, it is clear that counterterrorism measures to date have been, at best, insufficient. Perhaps most alarmingly, the dramatic worsening of the jihadi threat in Africa came while counterterrorism was the top U.S. priority in Africa. Now, its attention has shifted, raising concerns that the threat in Africa will further worsen. Why should the United States care?

Five Reasons Why the United States Should Care
As the African continent became embroiled in violence over the past 20 years, U.S. government officials working to counter the phenomenon have recognized the dire trends outlined above. A December 2019 Department of Defense Inspector General report noted that in the Sahel, the problem of jihadi-linked violence had grown so intractable that the Defense Department had "shifted its strategy from 'degrading' VEOs [violent extremist organizations] to 'containing' them."[119] Fast forward two years, and in June 2021, the commander of AFRICOM, General Stephen Townsend, stated that: "Despite all of our best efforts ... terrorism [on the African continent] continues to spread ... The spread of terrorism has continued relatively unabated."[120] In no uncertain terms and according to all measures, the threat from jihadis on the African continent has dramatically worsened since the U.S.-led efforts to minimize it began 20 years ago. Below, the authors outline five reasons why, beyond threats to people and states on the African continent, the United States should care.

1. The Direct Impact on Americans and U.S. interests
The violence has directly affected U.S. interests through high-profile, though infrequent, attacks on Americans. Perhaps most widely known, in September 2012, U.S. Ambassador to Libya, J. Christopher Stevens was one of four Americans that were killed when Libyans associated with Ansar al-Sharia (Libya) raided a U.S. consulate in Benghazi.[121] Protests and attacks on U.S. embassies occurred in Egypt[122] and Tunisia[123] as well. Another attack against a U.S. diplomatic facility occurred in October 2016, when an

individual inspired by the Islamic State stabbed a Kenyan guard at the U.S. embassy in Nairobi, Kenya.[124] In addition to striking U.S. diplomatic facilities, African jihadis have also targeted U.S. military personnel. For example, in October 2017, the Islamic State in Greater Sahara ambushed a joint U.S. and Nigerien convoy in the village of Tongo Tongo, Niger, killing four U.S. Green Berets. In January 2020, al-Shabaab attacked a military base housing U.S. and Kenyan troops in Manda Bay, Kenya; three Americans were killed.[125] Elsewhere, there have been attempted or thwarted attacks against U.S. facilities on the continent; for instance, in April 2017, Nigerian authorities revealed that they had thwarted a plan by "Boko Haram" to attack the U.S. embassy in Abuja.[126] Such attacks and plots are almost certain to persist in the future. In addition to the direct toll on American personnel from jihadi violence, such violence has imposed an intangible cost on the U.S. posture in Africa. With the proliferation of jihadi groups and their violence, American officials have increasingly been forced to seclude themselves in heavily fortified embassy compounds, limiting their ability to engage with the governments, organizations, and civilians who are central to the effort to reverse the tide.

Fortunately, American citizens in Africa have only rarely experienced the full brunt of escalating African jihadi violence to date. Since 9/11, only one American, Jeffery Woodke,[127] is definitively known to have been kidnapped by an African jihadi group (the Islamic State in West Africa Greater Sahara, ISWAP-GS); he remains in captivity as of this writing. Other American civilians have been victims of jihadi-linked African groups, though evidence does not suggest that they were targeted for their citizenship directly. For instance, in January 2013, members of AQIM attacked the In Amenas gas processing facility in Algeria, killing three Americans.[128] An American was killed when al-Shabaab struck the Dusit hotel and office complex in Nairobi in January 2019,[129] and more were wounded when the group attacked the Westgate Mall in 2013.[130] And yet, while American citizens have largely been spared in the jihadi violence wracking the continent, this will likely change if the current trends are not reversed.

The direct threat to the U.S. homeland from African jihadi groups has historically been limited and is likely to remain so. While African jihadi groups have occasionally demonstrated interest in attacking the United States, it has only ever been a secondary or tertiary goal for African jihadis. Most notably, in 2019, authorities arrested a Kenyan man, Cholo Abdi Abdullah, in the Philippines on weapons charges for planning a "9/11 style attack" inside the United States at the behest of al-Shabaab.[131] In addition, ISWAP (Lake Chad)—the most powerful Islamic State branch in Africa—is reportedly devoting resources to attacking "Western homelands," though it is not assessed to currently possess such capabilities.[132] AFRICOM Commander General Stephen J. Townsend stated in congressional testimony in January 2020 that most African jihadi groups "seek to strike at the U.S. in the region" and some "aspire to strike the U.S. homeland."[133]

2. Great Power Competition
The United States has made clear its fatigue with the "long wars" associated with counterterrorism and a concomitant desire to shift to great power competition, including in Africa. Unfortunately, left unchecked, jihadi groups will pose an increasing threat to U.S. interests in Africa and will thereby disrupt the United States' ability to compete effectively with other great powers. The United States' closest African partners—ones it certainly wishes to retain

in the competition with China and Russia—are among those most affected by jihadi violence. Thus, one important way to build lasting partnerships with governments and be the most desirable great power partner is to take seriously the threats facing these countries; though certainly not all countries' primary concern, threats from jihadism have emerged as a major threat in nearly half of the continent.

3. The Stability of Africa

In addition, the United States has been and will remain far more of a target for jihadis than China or Russia, both in Africa and globally. In fact, the limited, albeit consequential, number of attacks on U.S. interests in Africa over the past 20 years partially reflects the United States' heightened security posture there. Of the 30 U.S. diplomatic facilities worldwide designated as High Threat, High Risk posts, 15 are in Africa.[134] China now has three more embassies in Africa than the United States,[135] but perhaps more importantly, its personnel do not face the same degree of threat from jihadi actors. The growing threat to U.S. interests in Africa from jihadi groups will continue to constrain the U.S. diplomatic, development, and military engagement, which will in turn hinder its ability effectively compete with other great powers. In other words, in order to compete effectively with great powers in Africa, the United States must continue investing in efforts against jihadi violent actors.

In addition to the U.S. interest in countering jihadi threats in order to be effective in great power competition, it has an interest in preventing the growing destabilization caused by these groups. Jihadi violence has reached the point that it not only threatens the stability of individual countries, it also threatens the broader stability of much of the continent. Such violence now affects at least five regions on the continent and 22 countries, including several that had no history of jihadism prior to 2001, such as Mozambique and Burkina Faso. It is poised to spread further. The threat from jihadis destabilizing regions comes at a time when such stability is already a major problem. In its 2020 report, the Fund for Peace rated all but one of the countries experiencing a jihadi threat in Africa as in the "elevated warning," "high warning," "alert," and "high alert" and "very high alert" categories, the five least stable ratings of the 11 possible categories.[h] More broadly, 14 of the world's top 20 most fragile states are in Africa.[136] These trends show no signs of abating unless the jihadi threat is addressed, and as General Townsend summed it up: "Simply put, a secure and stable Africa is essential for America's security."[137] Indeed, a more permissive environment for jihadis in Africa, especially when coupled with one in Afghanistan, is a recipe for a broader jihadi resurgence.

4. American Economic Interests

The United States also has economic motivations to counter the jihadi threat. Africa is strategically important in the increasingly globalized world, and its economy is increasingly consequential with a dozen of the world's 25 fastest growing economies.[138] Already, many leading U.S. industries and Fortune 500 companies are investing in Africa, "contributing to U.S. jobs and increasing the revenue base for several cities."[139] Africa is an increasingly important part of U.S. companies' global portfolios.[140] As Grant Harris, the

> "Jihadi violence has reached the point that it not only threatens the stability of individual countries, it also threatens the broader stability of much of the continent. Such violence now affects at least five regions on the continent and 22 countries, including several that had no history of jihadism prior to 2001, such as Mozambique and Burkina Faso. It is poised to spread further."

Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for African Affairs at the White House from 2011-2015, has argued, "In the long run, the strength of the US economy will, in some way, depend on the interest and capacity of American businesses to operate in Africa."[141] And jihadis can threaten such investment. Nowhere has that become clearer than in northern Mozambique where a U.S. and European energy partners' plan to invest approximately $50 billion in liquid natural gas is being jeopardized by the growing jihadi insurgency of the Mozambican wing of the Islamic State's Central African Province.[142]

5. Broader Geopolitical Considerations

More broadly, as the United States seeks to remain a global leader in an increasingly multi-polar world, Africa has growing political and economic power, making threats to African states of consequence to the United States. One way Africa's sway has become clear is in international organizations. As the analyst Judd Devermont, who from 2015-2018 led the U.S. intelligence community's analytic efforts on sub-Saharan African issues, has pointed out, "It is difficult to advance a UN Security Council resolution without the support of Africa's three non-permanent members ... It is also important to win over African delegations in the UN General Assembly where the continent has the largest and most unified voting bloc."[143] More broadly, Harris captured Africa's strategic importance, saying "The preservation of US global influence requires the advancement of American values abroad and, more directly, cultivating and deepening relations with African states if the United States is to maintain its international standing... The African continent, with its fifty-four countries and over a billion people, will play a growing role in shaping the international order, and will affect the role and vitality of US leadership therein."[144] In short, Harris went on to sum up why the United States should remain invested in Africa:

> A review of Africa's importance to US national security emphasizes two key messages: first, that the United States ignores Africa—replete with vexing transnational threats as well as massive economic opportunity—at its peril; and second, that Africa's geopolitical and economic importance will only grow over time.[145]

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h   The exception was Tunisia, which received a "warning" rating. "Fragile States Index – Annual Report 2021," Fund for Peace, May 20, 2021.

Conclusion: Maintaining a Focus on Countering Jihadism, Adjusting the Strategy

No matter how one looks at it, the effort to counter jihadism in Africa is at a dangerous crossroads. The threat has reached unprecedented levels with no signs of abating. While the United Nations and Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State have recognized the need to prioritize Africa, international investment in countering the threat is rapidly diminishing. The combination of a metastasizing threat paired with reduced interest from the major international actors that have sought to mitigate violence portends dangerous times ahead in Africa. Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet now that the threat has deepened and spread as significantly as it has.

In looking back over the past 20 years, did the U.S.-led efforts to minimize the threats of violence by jihadi actors on the African continent succeed? Unfortunately not. Jihadi violence in Africa has significantly increased in size, scope, and depth, and is now at a level far beyond what it was prior to September 11. Moreover, the continent is more unstable and more dangerous than it was before. To explain this alarming situation, the authors have suggested four phenomena—the resilience of al-Qa`ida affiliates; the introduction of Islamic State branches; the enduring socio-political climates in many African countries; and unsuccessful counterterrorism approaches—that underpin the worsening of jihadi violence on the continent.

What then should be done? Above all, though it runs counter to the current political winds, the authors argue that it is premature and unwise to reduce investment in countering jihadi groups in Africa in favor of prioritizing great power competition. The already unprecedented threat from jihadism to U.S. interests in Africa, other Western governments, as well as partner nations in Africa is poised to increase further. In fact, the authors maintain that the United States will struggle to effectively compete with other great powers if it does not prioritize countering jihadism in Africa.

While the focus on jihadism should persist, there is a need for a serious reevaluation of the way the United States and its partners seek to counter the threat in Africa. Given the inability of policies over the past 20 years to successfully mitigate the threat, recommending "more of the same" is a recipe for a worsening situation. Instead, the authors propose five changes to the approach of the past two decades.

1. Fully Pursue More Realistic Goals

First, in light of the above recognition that more of the same offers little hope, in moving forward, it is essential to define a clear and achievable metric of just what "success" might reasonably entail when addressing African jihadi groups. Twenty years after 9/11, it has become clear that wholesale "defeat" of such groups is impossible. Conversely, allowing their unfettered proliferation is likewise unimaginable. The authors' view is that given the track record of the past two decades, "success" in countering the next 20 years of African jihadi violence requires the United States and international partners to contain the level of violence from such groups to a "tolerable" or "manageable" level, an admittedly substantial feat in the current situation. Indeed, there is already some recognition of the need for such a middle-ground metric of success. The 2019 AFRICOM Posture Statement articulates that the combatant command seeks a situation where such threats "are reduced to a level manageable by internal security forces,"[146] though

> "The approach of the past 20 years has highlighted that although some military operations will be needed to counter threats from al-Qa`ida- and Islamic State-affiliated groups, a security-centric strategy failed to stem the exponential growth of jihadism."

even this more modest goal remains well out of reach for the states most affected by jihadism today. By reframing goals to be more in line with the possible, a reduction in the expectations gap—what is expected and what can be done—of citizens and policymakers from the United States and the continent will help help sustain commitment to the mission and prevent disillusionment.

2. Shift Military Actions to be in Support of a Political-Centric Strategy

Second, to bring the level of jihadi violence on the African continent to a manageable—rather than unconstrained—level, the United States should rebalance its counterterrorism approach to prioritize political and economic engagement over the traditional military and security emphasis that it has held. The approach of the past 20 years has highlighted that although some military operations will be needed to counter threats from al-Qa`ida- and Islamic State-affiliated groups, a security-centric strategy failed to stem the exponential growth of jihadism. In January 2020, AFRICOM acknowledged that "The international community is not making durable progress to contain priority VEOs [Violent Extremist Organizations] in Africa, mainly because… [of a] lack a 'whole of coalition' balance between military and non-military investments."[i]

On the other hand, the current U.S. and French military drawdown comes at the worst possible time. Instead of swinging the pendulum so dramatically, military operations should continue but shift into being only one facet—a *supporting* facet—of what would essentially be a political surge, rather than military actions being an end unto themselves or the centerpiece of any strategy. Instead, efforts to improve governance, in particular adherence to the rule of law, anti-corruption initiatives, security sector reform, and an equitable and reliable provision of justice, should be the central focus.

Ultimately, African governments countering jihadi groups need to be seen as legitimate by the populations from which these organizations recruit. This gets back to a basic notion: to the extent that other organizing social paradigms can supersede the utility of membership in jihadi groups, they should be encouraged. The goal, more plainly, is to reduce the appeal of jihadi ideology. In addition, economically, the provision of sustainable livelihoods and economic opportunities can lessen the appeal of membership in such groups.

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i   Priority VEOs are those jihadi groups affiliated with al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. Stephen J. Townsend, "2020 Posture Statement to Congress," Testimony, Senate Armed Services Committee, January 30, 2020, p. 10.

3. Strike a Nuanced Approach to al-Qa`ida and Islamic State Affiliations

Third, it is necessary to strike a balance on how to view jihadi groups in Africa going forward: policies should not overemphasize the importance of these affiliations, while not minimizing the importance of such branding to local groups themselves. On one hand, their affiliations with al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State are the primary reason that the United States and other Western countries invest in combating these groups; indeed, there was little interest in countering the Allied Democratic Forces in the DRC until the group became part of the Islamic State in the Central Africa Province. On the other hand, however, viewing African jihadi groups associated with al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State primarily through the lens of their transnational affiliations misses the far more influential dynamics of their local conditions, which drive such groups' day-to-day activities more than al-Qa`ida Core or Islamic State Central. Moreover, focusing acutely on their transnational affiliations can also create an uncompromising, military- and security-centric approach to countering them, an approach that has fallen well short.

4. Consider Undertaking Negotiations

Fourth, with an outlook that prioritizes political engagement and views African jihadi groups with more nuance, negotiations with such groups can be a reasonable approach to lessen their violence, if not resolve broader conflicts. To date, the West has been reluctant to engage in or support negotiations with jihadi groups in Africa in no small part because of their al-Qa`ida or Islamic State affiliation and the corresponding military-centric responses. Western reluctance has effectively prevented African governments from engaging in negotiations as well.

There is some merit to this hesitancy now. The United States' deal with the Taliban, military drawdown, and the Taliban's subsequent takeover of Kabul and almost all of Afghanistan have quickly become synonymous with jihadi victory, an outcome that risks energizing the broader global movement. As that case makes clear, negotiations as a pretext to military withdrawal are clearly a failed approach to conflict resolution. But the failures in Afghanistan need not discredit the potential to engage in negotiations with some jihadi elements in Africa, especially those elements driven by more local conditions and grievances, without an artificial timeline or looming plan to withdraw.

Through negotiations—the composition of which should vary based on the particulars of each conflict—it can become clear whether groups have demands and grievances that can and maybe even should be addressed or whether some are truly irreconcilable, something impossible to determine based on rhetoric alone. Negotiations can also divide groups or foster internal tensions, as some elements will refuse to come to the table at all, which can both weaken groups and help to focus military efforts on the irreconcilable. Relatedly, off ramps that allow individuals or factions to renounce violence can be an important tool. A number of the jihadi groups in Africa use coercion as part of their recruitment strategies; thus, more viable avenues for exit can help to peel away some members. Defections are unlikely to produce major gains, but they can be a valuable tool when coupled with negotiations and a political-centric strategy.

5. Recognize the Complementarities Between Near Peer Competition and Counterterrorism

While the authors recommend that countering jihadism remain a priority, a final point is that fighting jihadism and countering international competitors on the continent are not mutually exclusive goals; to the contrary, they are highly complementary. General Townsend's 2020 Senate testimony noted that "building African partner capacity *is* global power competition,"[147] and this applies to counterterrorism assistance more specifically. It remains the case that the United States has a comparative advantage over its two primary rivals in the counterterrorism space on the continent. As China seeks to become a more entrenched security actor and Russia deploys its private military contractors across the continent, the United States could reasonably leverage its experience in counterterrorism as one of many avenues of security engagement with African partners. To be sure, seeking to engage with African states *primarily* through the lens of countering African jihadi groups as a primary fulcrum of engagement to counter China or Russia is inadvisable. At the same time, competing with near peers presents some of the same temptations as countering terrorism has: African governments can use these priorities to cozy up to the United States while ignoring necessary governance reforms. In pursuit of both priorities, the West would do well to think about the criteria for being a good ally so that governance, democracy, and human rights are a prominent part of the equation.

On the 20-year anniversary of 9/11, the prognosis in Africa is grim. The growth in the number of jihadi groups, the number of attacks, the number of casualties, and the number of countries affected point to the need for a continued focused on jihadism with a modified approach toward the new epicenter of jihadi terrorism in the world.   CTC

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