

BOTH JOBS AND JUSTICE IN THE 'WAR ON TERROR'

News headlines and television clips provide ample evidence of the military side of the 'war on terror': bombing raids against Islamic State fighters in Iraq, special forces incursions in Somalia, or ground operations against Islamist rebels in northern Mali. The killings of civilians by such insurgents generally provide the justification for forceful action.

The heat of battle and the atmosphere of urgency often seem to leave government officials and military commanders little time to ask a fundamental question: Can terrorism be defeated primarily through arms?



When pressed, they will likely respond, 'Of course not'. Addressing why some disaffected youths join terrorist groups is also vital, they may acknowledge, both to shrink insurgents' bases of support and to prevent future recruitment. As John Brennan, US President Barack Obama's top counter-terrorism adviser, put it in 2009, effectively opposing 'ideologies of violence and death' requires that governments see to the well-being of their citizens through a 'political, economic and social campaign to meet the basic needs and legitimate grievances of ordinary people'.⁽¹⁾

While officials often recognize the 'soft' side of combating terrorism, they seem less able to harness enough financing or political commitment to follow through. Even if the resources and will were available, however, identifying the best responses is not easy. Terrorism as such is not always distinguishable from other types of armed strife—and is often labeled so largely for political reasons. Moreover, the factors that precipitate large-scale armed violence are usually multiple, interact in complex ways, and vary greatly from country to country. One way to pinpoint some of the more common and promising areas for action is to look to the experience of conflict prevention efforts, including in Africa (which this article takes as its focus).

'Just trying to feed their families'

Although only a small fraction of poor people ever join armed insurgencies, the links between poverty and rebel recruitment are real. Sometimes confirmation comes from insurgents themselves. In 2012-13, most of northern Mali was occupied by armed Islamist groups, which competed not only with the central government but also with an ethnic Tuareg separatist faction, the Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad (MNLA). Referring to the ex-fighters from two of the Islamist groups, Moussa Ag Assarid, an MNLA spokesman, said, 'I was personally able to witness former combatants who said they were not jihadists, not even Islamists. They were just people trying to feed their families'.⁽²⁾

When asked about the best way to counter terrorist recruitment, the most frequent answer given by government authorities, security officials, civil society activists and others is development.

Their understanding of that term may be expansive, encompassing economic opportunities, greater education, improved health care and more active citizen engagement. Or it may be more specific, such as jobs and micro-enterprise support for at-risk youths.

The United Nations takes a broad perspective. Its Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, adopted in 2006, not only emphasizes preventing and directly combating terrorism, but also promoting conflict resolution, religious and cultural dialogue, economic and social development, countering social exclusion, and supporting good governance, human rights, and the rule of law.⁽³⁾ A few years earlier, in 2002, the African Union's Plan of Action on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism in Africa also went beyond a strict security approach to include the reduction of poverty, deprivation, and marginalisation.⁽⁴⁾

Evidence shows that targeted interventions can have an impact. In Côte d'Ivoire in 2008 - a time of stalemate in that country's civil war - the UN Peacebuilding Fund provided modest financing for 526 'micro-projects' designed to entice combatants from both sides to farm, raise small livestock, sell second-hand clothes, and run restaurants, cyber cafés, car washes, and other small businesses. Both UN and independent analysts detected a notable decline in crime and unrest by ex-combatants in the project areas.⁽⁵⁾

Similarly, a variety of 'Peace through Development' projects have been implemented by the UN, the US Agency for International Development and non-governmental groups such as Search for Common Ground in Chad, Niger, Mali and other Sahelian countries where youths have been recruited by insurgent groups. These initiatives usually combine job creation and micro-enterprise promotion with literacy classes, local government capacity building and other 'soft security' interventions. The aim is to provide local youths with alternatives to rebel enlistment. ⁽⁶⁾

And what about justice?

Government officials frequently seem more than ready to cite economic factors as contributors to terrorism and other forms of armed conflict, especially if that connection induces donor agencies to provide extra financing. Far less often are they willing to undertake deep-going reforms to tackle the fundamental social and political injustices that also motivate young people to rebel.

Surveys and interviews with young former fighters in various African countries and other parts of the world confirm that their reasons for joining insurgencies can be multiple. Many do act on the basis of perceived material interests, believing that victory may bring them jobs, money and other economic opportunities. But apart from ideology or simple self-defense, they also frequently cite social and political grievances: ethnic or other types of exclusion, rights violations, poor governance, and other systemic or institutional failings.⁽⁷⁾

Those who espouse extremist approaches often try to seize on such grievances to secure support. Yet social injustice, corruption and political exclusion often get only limited attention from national governments or external actors. In the turbulent eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, attempts to address local ethnic tensions, land disputes, and other sources of conflict were largely overshadowed by a focus on demobilizing the remaining armed factions and strengthening the national political process - far away in the capital. ⁽⁸⁾

In the Central African Republic, several peace agreements failed to address the marginalisation of the poor and largely Muslim north, spurring support for a takeover by the mainly Muslim Seleka rebel group in 2013 — which in turn prompted horrific reprisals by Christian militias. ⁽⁹⁾

In Mali, the French and African military defeat of the main Islamist insurgent factions in 2013 did not lead to open political dialogue with the Tuareg and other disaffected ethnic groups in the north. Instead it was followed by more central state dominance, 'failed efforts to decentralize power and growing socio-cultural cleavages'.⁽¹⁰⁾

In the language of international peacebuilding, tackling the 'root causes' of conflict requires dealing squarely with such inequities and injustices. Yet too often that has remained at the level of rhetoric, with little actual reform.

This shortcoming lies not only in the poor countries where armed insurgents are most active, but also in the richer ones where some of their fighters are recruited. Many Muslims living in Europe, for example, have a sense of social exclusion, leaving them more susceptible to extremist ideas, noted Volkan Bozkir, Turkey's Minister for EU Affairs. To counter terrorist recruiters he advised European governments to take action so

that their Muslim populations stop feeling they are 'outside the circle'.⁽¹¹⁾

As one African newspaper columnist put it: 'The problem of terrorism cannot be resolved without social justice and deep institutional reforms, by both nations and the international community, so as to eliminate all disparities and wrongs. We must attack the problem at its root.'⁽¹²⁾

The author

Ernest Harsch is a writer and academic who focuses on African political and development issues. He earned his PhD in Sociology from the New School for Social Research in New York, and currently is an adjunct associate professor of international affairs at Columbia University as well as a research scholar affiliated with that university's Institute of African Studies. He also worked on African issues for more than 20 years at the United Nations Secretariat in New York, including as managing editor of the UN's quarterly development journal *Africa Renewal*. His most recent book is the biography *Thomas Sankara: An African Revolutionary* (Ohio University Press, 2014), after earlier books on the struggle against apartheid in South Africa and the Angolan civil war.

1 Daniel Dombey and Alexandra Ulmer. "US shifts focus of anti-terror strategy," *Financial Times*, August 6, 2009, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/cf54d9f2-82c0-11de-ab4a-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3XC7JgPzx>

2 Rosalind Adams and Maxime de Taisne. "Interview with Moussa Ag Assarid, MNLA spokesperson for Europe," April 3, 2014.

3 UN General Assembly, "The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy: resolution adopted by the General Assembly," 20 September 2006, A/RES/60/288, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/504/88/PDF/N0550488.pdf?OpenElement>.

4 African Union, "Plan of Action of the African Union High-Level Inter-Governmental Meeting on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism in Africa," Addis Ababa: African Union, 2002, <http://bibliotecavirtual.clacso.org.ar/ar/libros/iss/pdfs/oau/PoAfinal.pdf>.

5 DPKO, PBSO, UNDP and DPA, "Joint review of the Priority Plan for Côte d'Ivoire, from 31 August to 4 September 2009," USA: UNDP, 2009; Kåre Lode, Milfrid Tonheim, Ibrahim Ag Youssouf, and Adolphe Balekembaka Musifiri. "An independent evaluation of the 1,000 Micro-Projects for Socio-Economic Reintegration of Ex-combatants, Ex-militia Members and Youth at Risk in Côte d'Ivoire," Côte d'Ivoire: Centre for Intercultural communication, 2009.

6 Daniel P. Aldrich, "First Steps Towards Hearts and Minds? USAID's Countering Violent Extremism Policies in Africa," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2014, pp. 523-546; United Nations and the Republic of Niger, "Jeunes, paix et développement dans la région de Tahoua," Niger: Republic of Niger, 2013; Search for Common Ground, "Peace through Development II," 2014, <https://www.sfcg.org/peace-through-development-pdev-ii/>.

7 Rachel Brett and Irma Specht, "Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight, Boulder," Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004; Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy Weinstein, "What the Fighters Say: A Survey of Ex-Combatants in Sierra Leone Working Papers Series, Center on Globalization and Sustainable Development," New York: Columbia University, 2004.

8 Séverine Autesserre, "The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding," Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, June 2010.

9 International Crisis Group, "Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition," Nairobi/Brussels: Crisis Group, 2013.

10 Bruno Charbonneau and Jonathan M. Spears, "Fighting for Liberal Peace in Mali: The Limits of International Military Intervention," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, Vol. 8, No. 2-3, 2014, p. 207.

11 Associated Press, "Turkish official: To end extremism, give Muslims opportunity," *Washington Post*, March 21, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/turkish-official-to-end-extremism-give-muslims-opportunity/2015/03/21/1655dc0a-cfb6-11e4-8730-4f473416e759_story.html

12 Boundi Ouoba, "Marche contre le terrorisme en Tunisie: Tant qu'il y aura des injustices...," *Le Pays Burkina Faso*, March 31, 2015, <http://lepays.bf/marche-contre-le-terrorisme-en-tunisie-tant-quil-y-aura-des-injustices/>