

HSPI Issue Brief Series

PARDON THE PIVOT, WHAT ABOUT AFRICA?

African lessons for avoiding myopic national security.

HSPI Issue Brief 17

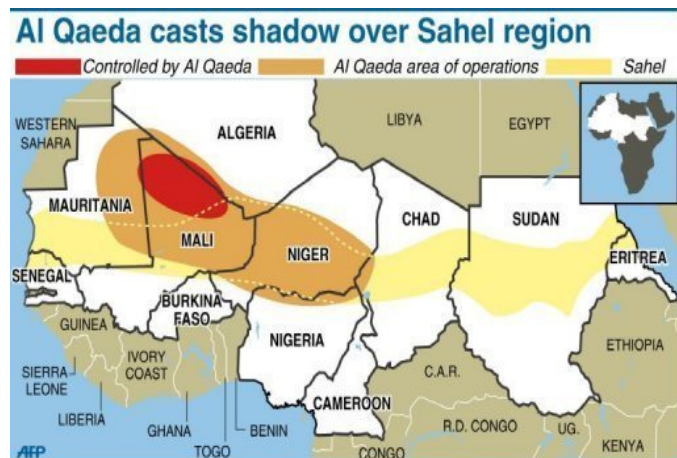
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Frank Cilluffo, Joseph Clark, and Clinton Watts

Islamist fighters, separatist violence, and France's recent intervention in Mali took much of the news media by surprise. More than a few journalists were left, like the satirical Stephen Colbert, drawing vague contextual comparisons between Mali and Afghanistan. Unfortunately the media's lack of knowledge may mirror a general lack of sustained and focused attention on the part of senior policymakers.

Mali, Algeria, and other troubled areas, have been (and continue to be) tinder boxes for the outbreak of conflict and spread of terrorism. In March 2012, Mali suffered a coup sparked by military frustration with the civilian leadership's prosecution of the Tuareg rebellion. Despite the installation of interim civilian government in April 2012, the coup unleashed a series of destabilizing events that eventually allowed Islamist forces to charge south seizing territory this past January. These events led to France's intervention — which the militants responded to by attacking a much softer target in Algeria. The attack against the In Amenas gas plant in Algeria was the deadliest terrorist attack on an oil and gas installation in the industry's one-hundred and fifty year history.

Recent events in these two countries, and in other African nation-states, illustrate how quickly and easily certain parts of Africa may shift from potential to actual hotspots. Furthermore, the presence of longterm concerns and trends at the continental level illuminate the critical need for continued emphasis on the security environment in Africa.



Agence France-Presse

Consider the following.

Africa is home to more than one billion people. In both geography and population, Africa is the second largest continent on Earth.

According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Africa is among the fastest growing economic regions in the world. In 2011, *The Economist* held that African economies were “consistently growing faster than those of almost any other region in the world.” Africa has great natural riches, a growing middle class, and has made progress in its struggles against malaria, HIV, and a host of other pathogens.¹

Still, vast stretches of the continent are archetypical *un-* and *under-*governed spaces. As a result, Africa is plagued by the sanctuaries of jihadi terrorists, networks of criminals and smugglers, as well as weak and worrisome governments.² The [2012 Global Terrorism Index Report](#) notes that in the last decade, the Middle East and North Africa have suffered the greatest number of fatalities from terrorism. In Nigeria alone, the number of terrorism related deaths (read, murders) jumped from 57 in 2010 to 165 in 2011 — an increase driven by Boko Haram.³ In its most recent [Country Reports on Terrorism](#), the US State Department drew attention to the dangerous roles foreign fighters, al-Qaeda operatives, and other violent extremists now play in Africa. At the strategic level, the State Department is particularly concerned about events in the Sahel — especially the rise and trajectory of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). However, the best summation of the situation in, and importance of, Africa, comes from Anders Fogh Rasmussen. The Secretary-General of NATO recently wrote that: “Virtually every day

“Virtually every day brings fresh evidence that an arc of crisis — from terrorism and weapons proliferation to cyber-attacks and piracy — is spreading from the Middle East and the Sahel to Central Asia.”

— Anders Fogh Rasmussen

¹ 2012. [Economic Development in Africa](#). United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2012 Report. New York, NY; United Nations. pp.2-5. 2011. “Africa’s hopeful economies: The sun shines bright.” London, UK; *The Economist*. Accessed online 05 December 2012 at: <http://www.economist.com/node/21541008>.

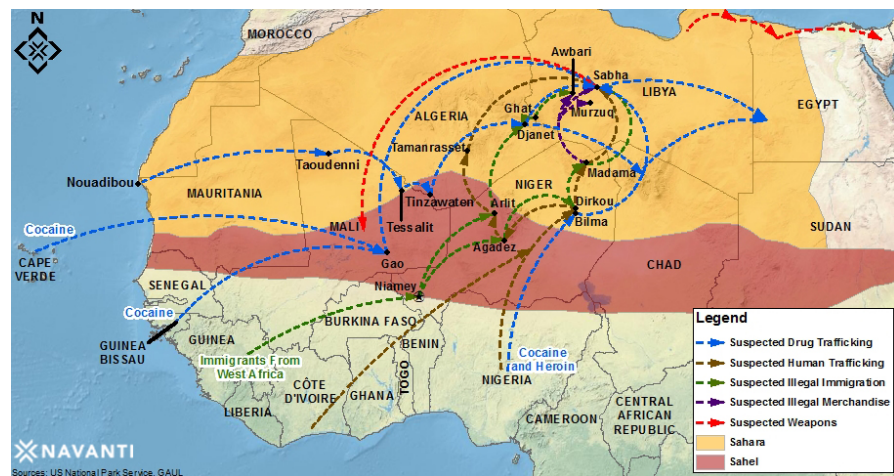
² Riedel, Bruce. 2012. “Al Qaeda 3.0: Terrorism’s Emergent New Power Bases.” New York, NY; *The Daily Beast*. Accessed online 05 December 2012 at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/12/03/al-qaeda-3-0-terrorism-s-emergent-new-power-bases.html>. Gambrell, Jon. 2012. “Islamist sect in Nigeria grows more deadly.” New York, NY; Associated Press. Accessed online 05 December 2012 at: http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5il6sYmxAHG1Rag8HM_4mbHagf1Q?docId=c6e08b6c1b5343f489253c782917dee6. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. 2012. “Transnational Organized Crime.” Website. New York, NY; United Nations. Accessed on 05 December 2012 at: <http://www.unodc.org/toc/en/crimes/migrant-smuggling.html>. 2012. [2012 Freedom in the World](#). Washington, DC; Freedom House. Accessed online 05 December 2012 at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world>. 2012. [2012 Ibrahim Index of African Governance: Summary](#). London, UK; Mo Ibrahim Foundation. Accessed online 05 December 2012 at: <http://www.moibrahimfoundation.org/downloads/2012-IIAG-summary-report.pdf>. 2012. [Africacenter.org](#). Website. Fort McNair, DC; Africa Center for Strategic Studies. Accessed online 05 December 2012 at: <http://africacenter.org/security/topic/>.

³ Institute for Economics & Peace. 2012. [2012 Global Terrorism Index: Capturing the Impact of Terrorism for the Last Decade](#). New York, NY; Institute for Economics & Peace, USA. Accessed online 09 December 2012 at: <http://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/2012-Global-Terrorism-Index-Report1.pdf>.

brings fresh evidence that an arc of crisis — from terrorism and weapons proliferation to cyber-attacks and piracy — is spreading from the Middle East and the Sahel to Central Asia.”⁴

Africa is a physical, cultural, and political crossroads. Africa is host to both wicked problems and fleeting opportunities. The scale is immense. The Sahel alone extends more than three-thousand miles from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, it is an area wider than the continental United States, and nearly a third the continental US’ total size.

In this vast space, a host of extremist actors are expanding both their reach and their capabilities. As noted earlier, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb now operates across the Sahel. An increasingly well-financed franchise of al-Qaeda, the group funds its terror activities via



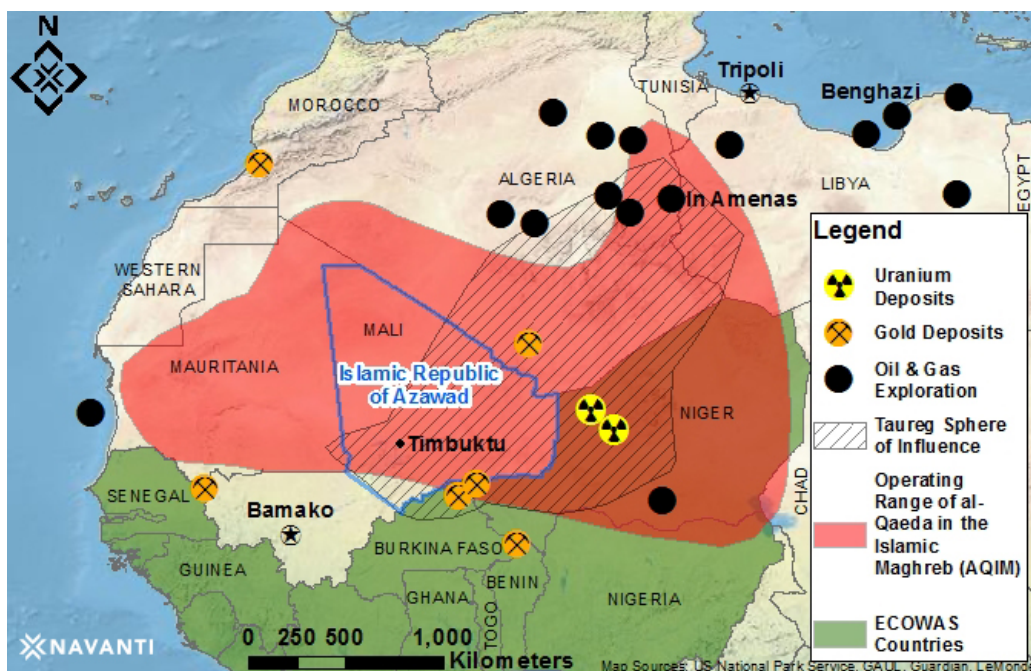
kidnapping, drug-running, and the illicit trafficking of tobacco and fuel. Furthermore, AQIM operates as a facilitator for other jihadi groups. AQIM has supplied deadly expertise to Boko Haram. Boko Haram’s improvised explosive devices, many of which are responsible for the casualty rates noted above, bear striking similarities to those used by AQIM. Defense Department officials have publicly stated that forensic evidence confirms AQIM shares its tactics and techniques with Boko Haram.⁵

In recent months, AQIM’s network of splinter and affiliated groups has spread throughout northern Mali. AQIM maintains strategic, tactical, and even personal ties to jihadists in the region. Iyad Ag Ghaly, Ansar Dine’s Tuareg leader, is said to have a cousin serving as a regional commander for AQIM in Kidal. Whether or not the stories of familial connections are apocryphal, the fact remains that close cooperation between the two groups resulted in the temporary creation of an Islamic state in Timbuktu

⁴ Bureau of Counterterrorism. 2012. *Country Reports on Terrorism 2011*. Washington, DC; United States Department of State. Accessed online 10 December 2012 at: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/195768.pdf>. Rasmussen, Anders Fogh. 2013. “The defence divided.” Amman, Jordan; *The Jordan Times*. Accessed online 28 February 2013 at: <http://jordantimes.com/the-defence-dividend>.

⁵ Ham, Carter F. 2012. Remarks made at the Homeland Security Policy Institute. Washington, DC; The George Washington University. A video of General Ham’s remarks can be found online at: <http://www.gwumc.edu/hspi/events/GENHamPRF416.cfm>. Shanker, Thom and Eric Schmitt. 2011. “Three Terrorist Groups in Africa Pose Threat to U.S., American Commander Says.” New York, NY; *The New York Times*. Accessed online 19 December 2012 at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/15/world/africa/three-terrorist-groups-in-africa-pose-threat-to-us-general-ham-says.html?_r=0:

and Kidal in which a version of Sharia law was instituted. In the pursuit of their objective of an Islamic state, Ansar Dine stoned “violators” to death, hacked off limbs, and pursued insurgent acts against the central government. In Gao, militants abducted hundreds of school children, forcibly indoctrinating them into jihad. Only the arrival of French forces brought in end to the onslaught of this particular episode of Islamist militancy.⁶



Despite the aggressive expansion of AQIM influence in the Sahel, many questions arise about the unity of AQIM and its offshoots. In December 2011, the Movement for Tawhid and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) emerged from AQIM’s orbit kidnapping European aid workers and becoming a dedicated force for the implementation of Sharia in Mali (again in Gao), executing a multi-faceted media strategy and performing attacks in Algeria. Likewise, one of AQIM’s long-time leaders, Mokhtar Belmohktar, was suspended from AQIM in October 2012 and by December 2012 had formed his own terrorist group al-Mouwakoune Bi-Dima (“Those Who Sign with Blood”). Immediately following France’s intervention in Mali, it was Belmohktar’s new outfit “Those Who Sign with Blood” that attacked the In Amenas gas facility in Algeria rocketing the group to international prominence. In early March of this year, Chad’s

⁶ Lambert, Michael and Jason Warner. 2012. “Who is Ansar Dine?” Atlanta, GA; CNN. Accessed online 19 December 2012 at: <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2012/08/14/who-are-ansar-dine/>. Associated Press. 2012. “Mali president acknowledges that extremist group Ansar Dine in north made up mostly of Malians.” Washington, DC; *Washington Post*. Accessed online 19 December 2012 at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/mali-president-acknowledges-that-extremist-group-ansar-dine-in-north-made-up-mostly-of-malians/2012/12/19/2d08e69a-49ee-11e2-8af9-9b50cb4605a7_story.html. Wallis, William and Tom Burgis. 2013. “Secular rebels seize Mali town.” London, UK; *Financial Times*. 30 January 2013, p. 4. Rice, Xan. 2013. “Bienvenue à Timbuktu.” London, UK; *Financial Times*. 03 February 2013, p. 5. Associated Press. 2013. “Mali’s Islamic radicals recruited child soldiers at schools.” New York, NY; Fox News. Accessed online 28 February 2013 at: <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/02/23/mali-islamic-radicals-recruited-child-soldiers-at-madrassa-schools-in-gao/>.

military forces claimed to have killed Belmokhtar. At the time of this writing, independent sources (including French forces) had yet to confirm Chad's claim. Should Belmokhtar be dead, his passing would remove one link connecting AQIM to attacks across North Africa — including potentially to last year's attack against the American consulate in Benghazi.⁷

Does the splintering of AQIM's influence into several groups represent more strength or disunity for the terror group in coming months? Will AQIM's network of affiliates swarm to achieve common goals or instead fight amongst each other for power and resources? Only time will tell as French forces, which cannot stay indefinitely, vacate Mali creating future opportunities for AQIM and the remnants of Ansar Dine time to regroup and again attempt to create an Islamist stronghold in Northern Mali. At that point, the question will become one of whether Islamists militants focus on combatting near enemies to increase the strength and scope of their control over local populations and geography, or whether they focus on strikes against far enemies in Europe and America to increase their prestige and relative position within the jihadi movement *writ large*.

In Somalia, al-Shabaab, though weakened, continues to pose a threat as it retreats into rural strongholds. There is now the danger that as the group suffers defeats, former members may join other terror organizations or melt away to initiate their own new and independent terror or criminal enterprises. Somalia, al-Shabaab and the larger Horn of Africa region have long been a conduit for al Qaeda connections between Africa and the Middle East. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has a history of operating in Africa and a proven capability to recruit foreign fighters from Africa for use against Western targets.⁸

What the preceding brief description of the current situation makes clear is this: Africa presents a unique set of security challenges — vast terrain, interwoven adversaries, and a range of hybrid threats.

⁷ Lebovich, Andrew. 2013. "Primer on Jihadi Players in Algeria and Mali, Pt. 2 Belhmoktar & Those Who Sign With Blood." *Jihadica*. 2013. Accessed online 5 February 2013 at: <http://www.jihadica.com/primer-on-jihadi-players-in-algeria-and-mali-pt-2-belmokhtar-those-who-sign-with-blood/>. 2013. Al-Qaeda commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar 'killed in Mali' London, UK; The Daily Telegraph. Accessed online 03 March 2013 at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/algeria/9905451/Al-Qaeda-commander-Mokhtar-Belmokhtar-killed-in-Mali.html>. Cruickshank, Paul, Tim Lister, and Nic Robertson. 2013. "Phone call links Benghazi attack to al Qaeda commander." Atlanta, GA; CNN. Accessed 05 March 2013 at: http://www.cnn.com/2013/03/05/world/africa/benghazi-al-qaeda/index.html?hpt=iaf_c2.

⁸ Lambert, Michael and Jason Warner. 2012. "Who is Ansar Dine?" Atlanta, GA; CNN. Accessed online 19 December 2012 at: <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2012/08/14/who-are-ansar-dine/>. Associated Press. 2012. "Mali president acknowledges that extremist group Ansar Dine in north made up mostly of Malians." Washington, DC; *Washington Post*. Accessed online 19 December 2012 at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/mali-president-acknowledges-that-extremist-group-ansar-dine-in-north-made-up-mostly-of-malians/2012/12/19/2d08e69a-49ee-11e2-8af9-9b50cb4605a7_story.html. Nor, Omar. 2012. "Somali army captures key town from Al-Shabaab rebels." Atlanta, GA; CNN. Accessed online 19 December 2012 at: <http://www.cnn.com/2012/12/09/world/africa/somalia-army-captures-town/index.html>. BBC News. 2012. "Nigerian men accused of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula links." London, UK; BBC News. Accessed online 19 December 2012 at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-18732176>.

Question is, to what degree is the national security apparatus of the United States paying attention? To what degree is the United States prepared to identify, understand, seize the problems — and exploit the opportunities — emanating from this complex and expansive environment? The short answer is this: too little attention is being paid, too little preparation is being done, and too few are paying enough attention.

Among the few who are paying attention, are the men and women of US Africa Command ([AFRICOM](#)). Last December, the Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI) at The George Washington University hosted the commanding general of AFRICOM, General Carter Ham. Information about his substantive remarks concerning African security can be found on the [HSPI website](#) and in media reports of the event, including in pieces by [The New York Times](#), [Reuters](#), the [Associated Press](#), and [Fox News](#).



General Ham’s comments about the security environment in Africa are important. His insights ought to be heeded by academics, policymakers, and practitioners. It is, however, General Ham’s comments about how attention is paid, the nature of the attention, and the expertise we bring to bear that are of importance here. Such items are critical to the substantive issues of Africa. More than that, they affect how policymakers and practitioners understand the global security environment at this moment in time (and perhaps the historic arc of this century). Such items also affect how policymakers and practitioners identify and understand emerging threats, including hybrid threats. In short, how policymakers, and practitioners learn about and understand the security environment shapes US capabilities and their very ability to protect the United States and its national interests.⁹ Again, the general’s comments provide an excellent start point — especially in regard to Africa.

“the force of the future is going to have to be even more agile and adaptive than today’s force.”

— General Carter F. Ham

In describing how the US military needs to prepare for the 21st century, General Ham noted that: “the force of the future is going to have to be even more agile and adaptive than today’s force.” Ham predicated this on a belief that American military forces would increasingly find themselves operating on unfamiliar terrain and inside unfamiliar cultures. General Ham posited the notion that success, therefore, would be based on language training, cultural awareness, and a baseline comfort

for operating in new terrain and inside unfamiliar cultures — for these things would endow US soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines with a critical ability to learn and adapt quickly.

⁹ Note, hybrid threats will add to — not replace — the traditional threats to national security. The risk they pose, however, may be heightened by their novelty and thus a related and relative inability to identify and address them.

General Ham's comments illuminate more than the keys to operational success, they highlight constituent elements of national security success — they focus attention upon how best to learn about and understand our security environment. Ham's comments are an argument against the bias of unquestioned assumptions; particularly those assumptions born out of past experiences, ethnocentricity, or the conventional wisdom *du jour*. The need for the kind of contextual knowledge and empirical clarity called for by the general is, or at least should be, self-evident. Nowhere is this more important than in the current security environment of Africa.

Still, even when its importance is recognized, an empirically based evaluation of core assumptions is very difficult to put into practice. The drumbeat of daily operations, short-term requirements, and limited resources often deny policymakers and practitioners the time necessary for reflection and analysis. It is a perverse paradox that the demands of national security often lead to inattention or perceptual blindness.¹⁰

Breaking out of the paradox is nearly impossible for practitioners and policymakers. The pathological effects of it can, however, be reduced. They can be reduced through the conscious and explicit consideration of a few key questions about any given operational context. Such a reflective process is important, for it considers “what is known,” “how it is known,” and “whether it is to be believed.”

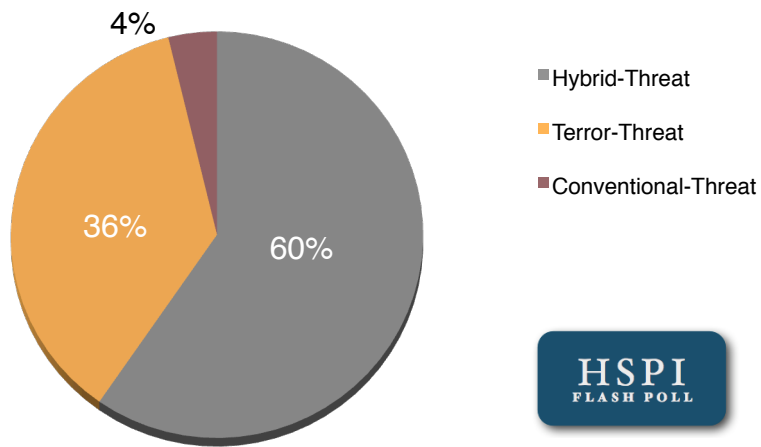
Because of the importance of such questions, HSPI conducted a flash poll concerning African security during the event with General Ham.¹¹ HSPI's intent was to shed light on the “what is known,” “how it is known,” and “whether it is to be believed” questions. The results were interesting and highlight our point. When asked how they would describe the most pressing security challenge facing the US in Africa, 59.6% of respondents stated they would describe it as hybrid threat. Another 36.5% said they would describe it as a terror threat. Only 3.8% said the most pressing security challenge facing the US in Africa could be described as a conventional threat.

¹⁰ Most, S. B., Scholl, B. J., Clifford, E., & Simons, D. J. 2005. “What You See is What You Set: Sustained Inattentional Blindness and the Capture of Awareness.” *Psychological Review*, 112(1), 217-242. Cater, K., Chalmers, A., & Ledda, P. 2002. “Selective Quality Rendering by Exploiting Human Inattentional Blindness: Looking But Not Seeing.” Proceedings of the ACM symposium on Virtual reality software and technology. <http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/585740.585744>. For a short, and effective, explanation of inattention or perceptual blindness follow this link http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=vJG698U2Mvo, then this one <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6qgoM89ekM>.

¹¹ Fifty-two people participated in the flash poll. The survey, which was completely voluntary, was conducted online via a link made available through the HSPI website.

When asked to provide more detail about the security challenges the US faces in Africa, comments from survey respondents essentially fell within two lines of thought. Many of those who participated in the poll highlighted the complexity of the situation. For example, one respondent wrote that the greatest challenge facing the US was a “combination of growing terrorist threats, widening expectations among the post-Arab Spring populations, and the inability of most local governments to deal with either or both.” Similarly, another respondent answered that the greatest challenge was posed by the “destabilization of nation-states directly impacting economic sustainability and making it much easier to allow terrorist groups to move into these areas and setup bases or broaden their current reach and membership.” The second line of thought expressed by respondents brought attention to the US’ lack of contextual understanding in Africa. One survey respondent said the most pressing security challenge facing the US was an existent “misunderstanding [of] the local situation in the Sahel and Sahara, thence conflating numerous legitimate, local groups with terrorism.” Another respondent captured concerns about US levels of context specific knowledge, describing the most pressing challenge facing the US in Africa as a “lack of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance sensing, data mining, analysis, and multilateral collaboration.”

How would you describe the most pressing security challenge the US currently faces in Africa?



HSPI’s flash poll suggests within the current context of African security, the “what is known,” “how it is known,” and “whether it is to be believed” questions are ripe and deserve increased attention.

Thus pause and again think about Africa. What do we know? How do we know? How confident are we? Yes, Asia is important — but before the US pivots and focuses the preponderance of its security resources in one direction, policymakers and practitioners need to stop and think about the security challenges that are emerging out of Africa.¹² Before assuming an understanding the situation, and

¹² Obama, Barack. 2011. “Remarks By President Obama to the Australian Parliament.” Canberra, Australia; Office of the Press Secretary, The White House. Accessed on 05 March 2013 at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>. F. William Engdahl. 2012. “Obama’s Geopolitical China ‘Pivot’: The Pentagon Targets China.” Montreal, Canada; Global Research.

before accepting without careful and explicit reflection that our strategies, doctrine, and capabilities are well matched to secure US interests in Africa — we recommend careful consideration of the following sets of questions.

Who are the key actors within key nation-states and terror groups in Africa (including Somalia, Nigeria, Mali, Libya, South Sudan, Uganda, and al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, AQIM, and Ansar Dine)? What are their intentions? What are their capabilities?

What are the challenges present in disrupting and/or defeating extremist groups in African hotspots? (Or, asked slightly differently, what are the political, economic, environmental, social religious and cultural issues creating a safe haven for the manifestation of extremist groups in African nation-states?)

What potential scenarios might emerge with regard to various extremist groups? If left unchecked, what potential threats to US national security might emerge from such extremist groups? What policy options are available to the US for countering extremist groups in various African nation-states?

What will be the primary factors shaping future outcomes with regard to specific countries and associated extremist group(s)?

Which aspects of various hotspots do we need to know more about to identify the direction of security in a given country and with respect to associated extremist groups?

Asking (and answering) the questions above will not serve as a panacea. Alone, such an exercise will not make US security policy smarter, more effective, or more efficient. Still, such an exercise brings attention to two very important issues. One issue is the substantive challenges posed by the security environment in Africa. The other issue is the larger question of how policymakers and practitioners understand threats to national security and the policies and activities designed to meet and mitigate them. Both deserve careful and deliberate contemplation.

In the weeks ahead, HSPI will — in collaboration with the Navanti Group — publish a series of short papers examining these questions in regard to specific African security challenges. Our goal is to draw attention to an under-appreciated, yet vitally important, security context. US interests and national security cannot afford a myopic focus on any specific geographic region. Furthermore, the challenges of today highlight the fact that US security requires careful consideration of, as well as participation and partnership in, Africa.

Accessed on 22 February 2013 at: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/obama-s-geopolitical-china-pivot-the-pentagon-targets-china/32474>. Kagan, Robert. 2012. "The Obama Administration's Pivot to Asia: A Conversation with Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell." Washington, DC; The Foreign Policy Initiative. Accessed on 05 March 2013 at: <http://www.foreignpolicy.org/content/obama-administrations-pivot-asia>. Ross, Robert. 2012. "The Problem with the Pivot." Washington, DC; Foreign Affairs. Accessed on 05 March 2013 at: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/138211/robert-s-ross/the-problem-with-the-pivot>.

In his remarks, General Ham highlighted the fact that the US cannot (and should not) attempt to address the complexity and diversity of African security alone, nor can the US ignore Africa and expect reactive after-the-fact responses to achieve US objectives and military missions. To illustrate his point, Ham referenced an African proverb he feels has particular relevancy for AFRICOM: “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” The General’s point has merit well beyond his command and should be kept in mind as the President’s new national security team begins its work.

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*Founded in 2003, The George Washington University **Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI)** is a nonpartisan “think and do” tank whose mission is to build bridges between theory and practice to advance homeland security through an interdisciplinary approach. By convening domestic and international policymakers and practitioners at all levels of government, the private and non-profit sectors, and academia, HSPI creates innovative strategies and solutions to current and future threats to the nation.*

The opinions expressed in this Issue Brief are those of the authors alone.

Comments should be directed to hspi@gwu.edu.