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## ADDRESSING RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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*Recent events in several sub-Saharan African countries raise concerns that religiously motivated violent conflict is on the rise. Perpetrated mainly by a number of extremist religious groups claiming Islamic or Christian identity, which has escalated during the last decade, this phenomenon is becoming one of the main challenges to peace and security on the African continent and requires renewed attention from policymakers at the national and international levels. The U.S. government (USG) should pay particular attention given the United States' commitment to religious freedom, as exemplified in its adoption of the International Religious Freedom Act in 1998. Addressing the issue of religious violence in sub-Saharan Africa requires not only a multi-level policy approach, but also the development of a holistic framework that will enable analysts and scholars to address the complexity of its causality, since religious violence is never only about religion.*

*In addressing the problem of religious violence in sub-Saharan Africa, this policy brief deals with the framework rather than the details of specific countries. It singles out three major factors that, if acted upon, could reduce the likelihood of religious violence occurring in Africa: 1) the politics of marginalization and exclusion; 2) arms trafficking and religious violence; and 3) interreligious dialogue and education for peace. Each section is concluded with recommendations for African institutions and U.S. policymakers to consider.*

## **THE POLITICS OF MARGINALIZATION AND EXCLUSION**

Significant The root causes of religious violence or conflict are often a conglomeration of a complex set of social, political and economic factors that feed the politics of exclusion and marginalization. This, in turn, breeds frustration that can be, in some cases, violently expressed in the idiom of religion.

Marginalization of a certain group generally stems from poor governance, one the main sources of instability on the African continent and a reason for the weakness of a number of African states constantly exposed to state failure. Many analysts have suggested that state weakness or failure is conducive to the thriving of terrorist groups, especially religious terrorism. Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar have convincingly argued that,

“The religious revival in Africa can be said to reflect a concern with poor governance, expressed in a different idiom, inasmuch as new religious movements are often

centrally concerned with the problem of evil in society and are looking for alternative sources of power... In the large number of African examples where religion is strong and states prove unable or unwilling to uphold a monopoly of violence or the rule of law, spiritual belief offers access to an alternative form of power and provides a social cement. In this sense the resurgence of religion is directly connected to the erosion of secular state apparatuses in cases where the latter has occurred.” (Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, “Religion and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Jun., 1998), 194-195)

Two other scholars further suggest that not only is religious terrorism on the rise in sub-Saharan Africa, but it is one of the consequences of the growing failure of states. As they put it:

“Africa is undoubtedly plagued by systematic state failure in that the region lacks strong governance, comprehensive economic development, and fails to provide security to its citizens and order in its territories. As a result, Africa’s failed states have helped facilitate internationally sponsored terrorist networks and operations.” (Tiffany Howard, “Failed States and the Spread of Terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 33:11 (2010): 961)

Nigeria, Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR) have witnessed some of the worst cases of religious violence in sub-Saharan Africa. One of the root causes of this violence is marginalization manifested through economic inequalities and/or political exclusion

embodied in the practice of ethnic and kinship politics at the expense of democratic governance and inclusive citizenship. The rise of extremists groups in the northern regions mostly populated by Muslims is partly the result of decades of political and economic marginalization. As Roland Marchal, a political scientist and researcher at Ceri-Sciences-Po in Paris, rightly puts it about Seleka coalition in CAR,

“These armed movements, until then more rivals than allies recruit in the north of the country and beyond the borders, among cross-border ethnic groups. In these regions, the presence of the state is marginal, the national sentiment is low, since the nationality of the inhabitants is often doubted, even those born in Central African Republic.” (“Idriss Déby a officieusement aidé les rebelles de la Seleka.” *l’Humanité.fr*; <http://www.humanite.fr/roland-marchal-idriss-deby-officieusement-aide-les-rebelles-de-la-seleka>)

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It is no surprise that recently, given the slow progress in peace talks between warring parties in the Central African Republic, some

sections of the Seleka coalition advocating the partitioning of the country announced the creation of a state in the predominantly Muslim north. An additional example took place in March 2013, when a pastor named Jomah Woiwor, Chairman of the Liberia Restoration to Christian Heritage, spearheaded a movement urging the legislature to restore Liberia as a Christian nation. In response, the Muslim minority strongly opposed the initiative. One of the Muslim protesters is quoted to have said, “For long, the Muslim community has been marginalized in the country.. It’s now time for us to rise up and speak for our rights.”

The same argument of a direct link between poor governance and violent religious revivalism holds for the rise of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria. Writing on the social and political conditions under which this group has emerged and attracted many young people, Abimbola Adesoji remarks:

“There was mass poverty; inequality in educational, political and employment opportunities; ignorance due to limited educational opportunities; growing unemployment; and governmental corruption, including the misuse of resources, by which the people were repulsed. These problems swelled the army of vulnerable people whose disillusionment and impoverishment made them easy prey in the hands of a demagogue like Yusuf. In particular, with the notorious corruption among the political elite, the country’s vast wealth has failed to improve the lives of citizens. This, coupled with stolen election mandates, has led to a growing disenchantment with the Western system of

governance, particularly among jobless young men.” (Abimbola Adesoji, “The Boko Haram Uprising and Islamic Revivalism in Nigeria,” *Africa Spectrum* 45, 2 (2010): 100)

### ***Recommendations:***

- Continue to press for the promotion of democratic governance and social justice principles, and make this a key demand of African states in Africa-U.S. relationships. Since the 1990s, African countries have made some progress in the appropriation of democratic culture. In the past two decades the United States has supported state and non-state actors engaged in the promotion of civil and political liberties in Africa. However, the path to inclusive citizenship in Africa is still long.
- Urge African countries, particularly those plagued or exposed to religious violence, to organize an inclusive national forum where patterns of economic and political exclusion can be openly addressed and dealt with in order to promote inclusive citizenship;
- Urge African countries to practice inclusive politics through robust affirmative action programs that empower and uplift marginalized communities; and
- Continue to press African countries to undertake innovative programs to address youth unemployment, both in urban and rural areas, given the fact that violent religious groups prey mainly on marginalized youth,

## **ARMS TRAFFICKING AND RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE**

The preamble of the United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (UNPoA) clearly acknowledges “the close link between terrorism, organized crime, trafficking in drugs and precious minerals, and the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons” and therefore underscores “the urgency of international efforts and cooperation aimed at combating this trade simultaneously from both a supply and demand perspective.” (UN Document A/CONF.192/15. <http://www.poa-iss.org/poa/poahtml.aspx>) The thriving of religious terrorist groups, like al-Qaeda in the Maghreb or Boko Haram, is largely responsible for the spread of religious violence in sub-Saharan Africa. These groups are boosted by the illicit international arms trade, which the international community has failed to take seriously enough in its quest for global security and peace. Poverty and the politics of marginalization—rampant in many countries—constitute some of the main factors conducive to insurgencies or rebellions; however, the wild (or does he mean wide – either is fine) proliferation of arms is another essential aspect of the problem.

Writing about West Africa, Alex Vines rightly remarks that violent conflicts “have been fuelled by a pool of young people frustrated by a lack of employment prospects and easy access to light weapons. Combating access to such weapons is important in any development efforts to support this fragile and troubled region.” (Cf. Alex Vines, “Combating

light weapons proliferation in West Africa,” *International Affairs* 81, 2 (2005): 341-360) Alex Vines further suggests that both state and non-state arms traders are taking advantage of the market’s opacity to supply rebel movements and terrorist organizations. For example, the recent dismantling of the Kaddafi regime in Libya has benefited many militias in the Sahel region and thereby boosted both arms trafficking and violent conflicts in West and Central Africa. The proliferation of rebels and terrorist movements in Northern Mali is a good illustration.

Armed religious rebellions still constitute a major threat to the security of a number of African countries. In the past three years Mali, the Central African Republic and Nigeria have all been case studies about the ability of African states to ensure the security of their national territories and people. In all three instances, national governments, as well as regional and continental institutions, have exhibited weakness in dealing with rebellions that are threatening their people and their sovereignty. In Mali, for instance, the failure of both the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) to offer a timely and efficient diplomatic and military response to the Islamist threat led to the intervention of France. More recently in Nigeria, national security forces plagued by internal dissensions, corruption, and a lack of proper equipment and training have not found the proper response to the challenge and threats posed by Boko Haram in the Northern regions.

Torn between protocols and treaties couched in idealistic terms, strategies, or economic

interests, the international community has failed to be consistent in its approach to combating the illicit arms trade. In 2001, the United Nations adopted The UN Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Illegal Trafficking in Firearms and Ammunition (UNFP) which was the first global instrument in the fight against transnational organized crime and firearms trafficking. In 2005, the protocol was implemented. Unfortunately, several world powers—including China, the United States and Russia—have not yet ratified the protocol, which raises questions about its legitimacy and effectiveness. Neither have they ratified the most recent United Nations Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), adopted in 2013. At the continental level, both the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities have put forth a number of initiatives aimed at eradicating the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons. For example, on October 31, 1998, in West Africa, the region most affected by this plague, ECOWAS adopted on the world’s first regional Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation and Manufacturing of Light Weapons. It was subsequently replaced in 2006 by the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, their Ammunition and other Related Materials. However, these efforts have been thwarted by the failure of member states to fully comply with stipulated rules and regulations, as well as a lack of leadership on the issue.

The inconsistent approach on illicit arms trafficking from the international community is not only costing hundreds of thousands of lives, but will also slow down the so-called “Global War on Terror” across the African continent. Unless this critical issue becomes a priority on

the agenda of policymakers, much of the efforts in trying to build peace on the African continent could prove ineffective. Beyond national and regional policies, strong leadership and cooperation of world powers is needed to intensify the fight against illicit trade of arms. Ratifying and enforcing related international instruments would, in the long run, contribute not only to the stability in Africa, but also help the war in against terrorism. Unfortunately, progress in tackling this issue has been incremental.

### *Recommendations:*

- Assist the African Union and African Regional Economic Communities in their effort to regulate arms trading and eradicate illicit arms trafficking;
- Urge the African Union and African Regional Economic Communities to implement the existing norms and regulations on arms trade and apply sanctions to limit non-compliance;
- Encourage the United States and other world powers to play a greater leadership role in combating illegal arm trades by ratifying and enforcing existing UN treaties; (two different recommendations here so you should separate them – one is for the United States to paly a leadership role and the other is the United States to encourage other world power...
- Assist the African Union and African Regional Economic Communities to establish and equip as soon as possible an effective standby force for emergency interventions; this force

will boost the African continent's capacity to deal with armed religious groups such Boko Haram and other threats to the sovereignty of individual countries.

## **PROMOTING INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND LEADERSHIP FOR PEACE**

The contribution of faith-based organizations and religious leadership to peace-building all over the world is now widely acknowledged and documented. African communities are still overwhelmingly religious and sometimes even trust their faith leaders more than the political elite. For this very reason, it is important to see these individuals as part of the solution to addressing religious violence on the continent.

In sub-Saharan Africa, interfaith organizations exist at the local, national, and continental levels. The most notable and far-reaching organizations to date are the African Council of Religious Leaders (ACRL) started in 2003, the Inter-Faith Action for Peace in Africa (IFAPA) founded in 2002, and the Program for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) initiated in 1959. All three are based in Nairobi, Kenya, which is an indication that continental efforts towards interreligious dialogue and action for peace have been driven by an agenda mainly set by English-speaking Africa. Besides holding interfaith summits, one of the main activities of these organizations is to visit countries destabilized by conflict—especially interreligious violence—in order to boost local efforts for peace-building.

## *Recommendations:*

- Encourage the AU to set up a commission on the model of USCIRF to promote religious freedom at the continental level with the possibility of collaboration with the USCIRF;
- Urge the African Union and individual countries to establish offices that monitor religious freedom and coordinate interfaith efforts for peace-building;
- Support training programs for religious leaders on conflict management and religious tolerance;
- Undertake country-level programs that involve the media and religious leaders in the promotion of a culture of religious tolerance at the grassroots levels;
- Find innovative ways of reaching out to extremist groups to prevent isolation that leads to further radicalization; and
- Support research and studies on religious extremism in Africa in order to foster evidence-based policies.

Photo Credit on page 1:  
A Ugandan soldier serving with the African Union Mission in  
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## THE AFRICA PROGRAM

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The Africa Program's mission is to analyze and offer practical, actionable options for addressing some of Africa's most critical, current and over-the-horizon issues; to foster policy-focused dialogue about and options for stronger and mutually-beneficial US-Africa relations; and to challenge the dominant narrative about Africa by enhancing knowledge and understanding about Africa in the United States. The Africa Program has four programmatic pillars: i) governance and leadership; ii) conflict management and peacebuilding; iii) trade, investment, sustainable development and human security; and iv) Africa's evolving role in the global arena. The roles of youth, women, and technology are critical to Africa's future - to good governance, securing peace, mitigating poverty and assuring sustainable development. As such, these issues are addressed across all four thematic areas.

The Southern Voices Initiative supports the Africa Program's mission by bringing African perspectives into discussions about US policy towards Africa. This policy brief is an integral part of that initiative. Find more information about the Southern Voices Network and participating member organizations.

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