



# Strategic Priorities in Contemporary Africa: Part III

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By Richard Joseph

*In the third of a three-part series for the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Dr. Richard Joseph examines Africa’s “prismatic narrative,” in which African developments must be viewed “through the prism of how key dimensions interrelate and the complex interplay of local, regional, and global factors.” The article can be read below or [on the Chicago Council’s website](#).*

At the time of the G8 and NATO summits, Africa has assumed greater importance in global hopes and concerns. Accelerated growth and development, democracy, and the containing of organized violence are central themes of the new African security agenda. Two decades ago, African issues, except for the export of crude petroleum and other minerals, could be bottled

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within the continent. That is no longer the case. Major discoveries of oil, gas, and coal are making the continent more significant in meeting global energy needs. Abundant and underutilized land will steadily contribute to global food supplies. And expanding economies will continue to provide increased opportunities for investors. It is the physical security side of the African ledger, however, that poses the greatest challenge. How this is tackled will greatly affect progress in other areas.

I call this the “prismatic narrative” because it requires assessing African developments through the prism of how key dimensions interrelate and the complex interplay of local, regional, and global factors. In a forthright article in *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2012), General Raymond T. Odierno, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, discussed adjustments in American forces in response to new strategic challenges. Following prolonged combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, General Odierno states that the U.S. Army, together with U.S. Special Forces and other units, will devote increased attention to “shaping the strategic environment, preventing the outbreak of dangerous regional conflicts, and improving the army’s readiness to respond to a range of complex contingencies worldwide.” Although General Odierno says little about Africa, what he details has huge implications for American engagement with the continent.

The new security agenda also reflects a consensus that has emerged in Africa over the past three decades. Each of the key dimensions can, in fact, be associated with a significant externally generated event. The first was the publication by the World Bank in 1981 of what became known as the Berg Report after its chief author, Elliot Berg: *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa – An Agenda for Action*. Although criticized in some quarters, the main features of the Berg Report—which dissected the failed statist economic policies in Africa and outlined steps for a transition to more market-based systems—were reflected in economic reforms eventually adopted by most African governments.

The second event was the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which removed a large counter-weight to electoral democracy as the basis of legitimate governmental authority worldwide. The economic successes since achieved under an authoritarian system in China have not altered this fundamental shift. With few exceptions, today all African governments lay claim to legitimacy conferred by periodic elections, however flawed these may be in practice. The third signal event was the September 2001 terrorist attack and collapse of the World Trade Center towers. The launching of retaliatory ground wars in two Islamic countries, Iraq and

Afghanistan, and the continued lack of progress on Israeli-Palestinian issues, have contributed to the upsurge of Islamic militancy in the African continent, half of whose population is Muslim. How resurgent Islam is integrated into, and accommodated by, national and regional systems is one of the greatest challenges of our time. The African context is no exception.

C. Sylvester Whitaker, a leading scholar of northern Nigeria, published an essay in 1990 entitled, “The Unfinished State of Nigeria.” It connects with an excellent set of articles on Africa in the May 2012 issue of *Current History*. One of these is “Continental Cooperation: The Regionalization of African Security” by Will Reno of Northwestern University. Reno discusses the unprecedented cooperation now taking place in Africa between national, regional, continental, and international agencies on peace and conflict issues. While acknowledging the central problem in many African countries to be the “dearth of state authority,” he sees the expanding security assistance as constituting, in effect, “major state-building operations.”

There is a need for greater attention by policy research centers, academic programs, and philanthropic and corporate entities to the evolving infrastructure of international engagement in Africa. What is implicitly being addressed is the unfinished nature of many African states: unfinished in their capacity to exert legitimate force over their territories; and unfinished in their capacity to facilitate the provision of basic public goods, especially food, water, health, transportation, and shelter. Some of these gaps are likely to be filled, incrementally, by the extension of the military and intelligence services of the United States and other allied powers. Islamic militancy is drawing the United States and its allies into deeper security engagement in Africa than at any time since the end of the Cold War.

With few exceptions, African countries, and regional and continental organizations, are unable to contain these threats by themselves. The aftermath of the bombing of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 demonstrated how an effective response can be engineered. The long delay in responding to challenges posed by armed militias and pirates in a collapsed Somalia, or earlier by marauding warlords in Liberia and Sierra Leone, will not be repeated in northern Nigeria and Mali—to cite two countries where long-brewing Islamic insurgencies have acquired lethal capacities. After jihadist groups claiming affiliation to Al Qaeda were kept at bay for several years in the sub-desert lands of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, one of them, Ansar Dine, has now installed itself alongside secessionist Tuareg militias in northern Mali.

Whatever the preferred rubric for the “war on terror,” it is now present in the under-governed lands of Sahelian and equatorial Africa. The scale of the violence and deaths there is rising

rapidly. For example, 164 persons were killed in the Mumbai terrorist attack of November 29, 2008. However, many more deaths were reported in an attack, attributed to Boko Haram in Kano, Nigeria, on January 21, 2012. And this was just one of the frequent mass killings now occurring across the breadth of northern Nigeria. The prismatic narrative of growth, democracy, and security is being shredded in Nigeria. Regluing the pieces will require an immense exercise involving the mobilization of economic, political, and social power alongside the ramping-up of counter-insurgency capacities.

According to Sani Umar, another Northwestern colleague and Islamic scholar, the upsurge of militant Islam in west and equatorial Africa must also be seen as part of the “societal response to state failure.” This comment suggests the research and policy work that must be conducted to complement military-designed interventions. The new global engagement with Africa is a largely positive development. Ensuring that it continues to evolve in a salutary manner, in light of the unconventional warfare now unfolding, requires that we increase our understanding of the complex factors involved.

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