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Getting Counter-Terrorism Wrong in the Sahel

Background

In February 2019, the African Union's Peace and Security Chief, Chergui, warned that terrorism was expanding across the vast expanse of the Sahel at a phenomenal rate. Since this announcement there have been terror attacks almost every week in the Sahel with Burkina Faso and Mali bearing the brunt. The proliferation of terror groups can scarcely be denied by any observer. Whilst their names may sound exotic - Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al Murabitoun, Ansar Dine, Ansarul Islam, Boko Haram, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, and the Macina Liberation Front – their violent rampage across the region is a harbinger of death and destitution to the hapless citizens of the Sahel.

Discussion

The escalation of the attacks and their frequency is somewhat surprising given the presence of the 5,000 strong regional force in the form of the G-5 Sahel (consisting of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) as well as the 4,000 strong French Operation Barkhane troops in the region and the presence of the United States Africa Command. In addition, various European countries also have boots on the ground as do the Chinese. Indeed, it would appear that despite the impressive counter-terrorism force arrayed against the militants, they are winning. This invariably begs the question as to what are the driving forces of the Sahel insurgencies. Realist approaches to security with their defence of the *status quo*, their state-centric paradigm and their rather simplistic approach of the good government *versus* the bad terrorists seemingly are a poor fit for the realities on the ground in the Sahel. For this reason, we turn to Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS).

Very simply, CTS scholars are critical of the existing terrorism literature, they are critical of the discourse on terrorism produced by academics and policy-makers and they are critical of the institutional structures which produce and interact with this discourse. Whilst there is a diversity of views amongst critical terrorism scholars,

all reject the state-centric perspective of traditional terrorism discourses. Stump and Dixit cogently argue that, "*Those utilizing the critical terrorism studies perspective argue that conventional terrorism scholarship takes for granted the object of study (terrorism), is non-reflexive about the effects of portraying particular groups of people as `terrorist', ignores the role of the state as a producer of violence, and is uncommitted to social emancipation.*" Indeed, much of terrorism scholarship is confined to that of non-state actors. In this discourse, the state's role as a producer of insecurity is never analysed or critiqued. Yet, historically, states have employed terrorism to control dissidents within its own borders as well as a foreign policy tool.

Jackson, Murphy and Poynting remind us that "… *during the twentieth century, modern states were responsible for the deaths of 170 million to 200 million people outside of war, a great many of them murdered during notorious campaigns of state terrorism such as Stalin's great terror, Mao's Great Leap Forward, and Kampuchea's return to Year Zero, and the rule of various dictatorial regimes …*". This is especially true in the Sahel where the human rights records of regimes are atrocious. Some of these regimes also operate as members of the Sahel G-5 force.

Since the launch of the US-led Global War on Terrorism in 2003, Mauritania's former president `Ould Sid' Ahmed Taya would make use of counter-terror legislation to suppress legitimate civil dissent to his autocratic rule. The current president of Mauritania, Aziz, who initially came to power in a military coup follows Taya's example. He has cracked down on legitimate dissent ostensibly on the basis of fighting extremism whilst strengthening his security apparatus with the support of Washington and Paris. His reign, however, has only served to galvanize support for AQIM in the country.

During 2007-2009 in Niger, former president Tandja conducted a policy of systemic human rights abuses against ethnic Tuaregs. According to Keenan this negatively affected two million ethnic Tuaregs in varying ways. Niger's current president, Issoufou, is no democrat. He was re-elected president in February 2016 after his main opponent was imprisoned and then forced to flee the country for exile.

Idrissa, a Nigerien journalist, notes that the Niger president and his regime enjoy no legitimacy and that the people feel alienated from the political class. As a result, the government routinely uses repressive means to stay in power. Issoufou and his government sees cooperation with Western powers in the fight against terrorism as a means to extend their reign. Whilst providing the US with bases from which to launch drones against terrorists, Issoufou's regime receives financial assistance from Washington as well as training and arming of his already repressive security apparatus. This financial assistance hardly reaches ordinary citizens. As Idrissa bluntly states, "*We have a super-rich political class and a mass of people who have been abandoned*". At the same time, political resentment breeds insurgency. Given the fact that 94 percent of Nigeriens are Muslims, this insurgency takes on an Islamic flavour. The government then labels this `terrorist' and gets Western countries to help suppress an often-legitimate opposition. The discourse of terrorism together with a repressive state security apparatus, armed and trained by Western governments, then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as moderate Sufi Islam is then replaced by a more radical Salafi Islam.

Summary

In the Sahel, militant insurgencies began as sub-state terrorist groups. Western support for the often-corrupt states of the region in the form of counter-terrorism assistance, results in these sub-state terrorist movements finding support from other external sources as well. This outreach for foreign support facilitates the entry of global jihadists into the Sahel in the form of Al Qaeda and Islamic State. The international community needs to problematize the African state, utilizing its leverage over Sahelian governments to open up the democratic space in their respective polities. No amount of military force will defeat the terrorists operating in the Sahel unless the root causes for this insurgency is addressed. Opening up democratic spaces is one catalyst to weaken the growing appeal that radicalisation holds for alienated Sahelian societies.

Further Reading

1.   J. Joseph, "Critical of What? Terrorism and its Study," *International Relations* Vol. 23 No. 1. 2009.

2.   J. Keenan, *The Dying Sahara: US Imperialism and Terror in Africa*. Pluto Press. London. 2013.

3.   J.L. Stump and P. Dixit, "Towards a Completely Constructivist Critical Terrorism Studies," *International Relations* Vol. 26 No. 2. 2011.

4.   R. Jackson, E. Murphy and S. Poynting (eds.) *Contemporary State Terrorism: Theory and Practice.* Routledge. London. 2010.

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