Rethinking International Counterterrorism Assistance to the Greater Horn of Africa: Toward a Regional Risk Reduction Strategy

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Abstract

The Horn of Africa has long been a recipient of foreign security assistance, with significant funds increasingly devoted to supporting subregional civilian-oriented counterterrorism efforts over the past decade. Despite efforts to better coordinate delivery, counterterrorism programming in the subregion generally remains fragmented, short-term, and siloed in implementation. This article argues that it is time to rethink the international community’s approach to counterterrorism assistance to the Horn of Africa and calls for a cohesive regional approach that not only bridges the gap between security and development, but also the gap between counterterrorism and human security. It emphasizes that the international community must not only better coordinate existing streams of counterterrorism assistance to the region, but also rethink how this assistance is designed and the ways it can be delivered to complement broader subregional development and security agendas. After a brief introduction to international counterterrorism assistance to the Horn of Africa, the article examines linkages across three thematic streams of programming being delivered to the subregion: anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism; criminal justice capacity building assistance to counter terrorism; and, countering violent extremism. This discussion will highlight the need for a regional risk reduction strategy for the Horn of Africa that not only builds on the interplay of different streams of counterterrorism assistance, but on synergies across broader subregional development and security agendas as well.

Keywords: anti-money laundering, capacity building, countering the financing of terrorism, countering violent extremism, criminal justice, counterterrorism, East Africa, Horn of Africa, human security

Introduction

As communities in the Horn of Africa struggle to overcome a range of deeply complex development and security challenges, persistent threats posed by violent extremism and transnational terrorism remain serious national security concerns both for the subregion and the international community. Though the subregion has long been a recipient of foreign security assistance, international support for subregional counterterrorism efforts has become increasingly civilian-oriented over the past several years. While the shift toward civilian-oriented counterterrorism can be credited with a number of significant gains, its long-term impact on reducing terrorism-related risks in the subregion remains to be seen.

As the nature, scope and extent of civilian counterterrorism assistance to the greater Horn of Africa has become increasingly diverse, the time is ripe to reflect on where counterterrorism fits in the long view of the development and security challenges of the subregion. It is time to
rethink the international community’s approach to counterterrorism assistance to the Horn of Africa. This article offers a starting point for this discussion. A cohesive regional approach that not only bridges the gap between security and development, but also the gap between counterterrorism and human security, is essential to sustainably reduce terrorism-related risks in the subregion. The international community must not only better coordinate existing streams of counterterrorism assistance to the region, but also rethink how this assistance is designed and the ways it can be delivered to complement broader national and subregional development and security agendas.

Our discussion begins with a brief introduction to international counterterrorism assistance in the Horn of Africa. This will be followed by a more in-depth exploration of the linkages across three thematic streams of counterterrorism programming being delivered in the greater subregion:

- anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism;
- criminal justice capacity building assistance to counter terrorism; and,
- countering violent extremism.

Greater integration across these streams of assistance, already being delivered by a multiplicity of international actors is an important first step to strengthening national resilience to terrorism-related risks in the subregion. However, international counterterrorism assistance alone cannot sustainably address the challenges posed by terrorism in the Horn of Africa. Aligning this assistance with mutually reinforcing local, national, and regional development and security efforts is essential for long-term impact. Each thematic discussion offers a sampling of constructive ideas for adapting existing programming priorities for greater alignment with local development and security objectives. Following the conclusion of these thematic discussions, we highlight a selection of widely-supported, but often overlooked practices for donor governments delivering civilian counterterrorism assistance in the greater Horn of Africa subregion.

It is impossible to cover the depth and complexity of the development-security nexus of the greater Horn of Africa in the form of a single journal article. Accounting for these complexities in accordance with the local contexts is essential for effective development and security cooperation, and we encourage readers to refer to our extensive footnotes for additional information and resources on issues we may have been unable to address more extensively in the text.

**Background**

The greater Horn of Africa has made a number of promising economic and political gains in recent years.[1] Several countries have been riding a wave of rapid economic growth, and despite lingering conflict, South Sudan secured independence following a successful public
referendum in 2011, and a new Federal Government of Somalia has been inaugurated with overwhelming support from the international community. Nevertheless, the subregion faces an array of ongoing challenges stemming from underdevelopment, weak governance, widespread poverty, intermittent violent conflict, and other sources of human insecurity, including transnational terrorism and organized crime. Pressures to decisively address these transnational terrorist and criminal threats are testing the limits of national capabilities and resilience. Governments are often unable to meet the basic needs of local communities, let alone the challenges posed by complex transnational terrorist threats.

How can this cycle be broken? Part of the solution is already in place. The greater Horn of Africa has been a key geographic focus of bilateral and multilateral counterterrorism-related assistance since the 1990s.[2] This is not surprising given the transnational security risks emanating from Somalia and Yemen, and long-held concerns over the danger posed by the al-Qaida cells based around the greater subregion over the past two decades.[3] Particularly over the last five years, international capacity building and technical assistance to the greater Horn of Africa and elsewhere has increasingly focused on civilian counterterrorism assistance activities. While at times articulated in the context of broader strategic frameworks, assistance may end up ultimately being fragmented in implementation. Even when conceptualized to achieve high-level strategic objectives, donor counterterrorism assistance can often get lost in translation by the time it reaches the ground. Indeed, many counterterrorism projects are designed with inadequate consideration of the sectoral capacity deficiencies of local government institutions, or the complexity of society-state relationships, and have been largely disconnected from broader development and security initiatives being undertaken across local, national and regional contexts.

Though there have been some signs of improvement in the strategic coordination of such programming, the field remains somewhat ad-hoc and short-term in scope. To address this challenge, multilateral initiatives such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), established in 2011, and its Horn of Africa Working Group under the leadership of the European Union and Turkey, have been working to bring coherence to civilian counterterrorism assistance efforts across the greater subregion.[4] However, strengthening coordination of diverse counterterrorism initiatives is only half the battle. Aligning this assistance to complement broader development and security agendas will be essential for sustainably addressing threats posed by terrorism in the long term.

**Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism**

Despite the challenges confronting the subregion, a number of countries in the Horn of Africa have been experiencing tremendous economic growth in recent years. Ethiopia, for example, ranked the 12th fastest growing economy worldwide in 2012, outpacing economic powerhouses like China and India, and was the 4th fastest in Africa with an average GDP growth of 10.7 percent per year over the past decade.[5] However, the lack of a robust anti-
money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism (AML/CFT) regulatory regime may threaten to deter foreign investment and leave financial flows vulnerable to criminal exploitation. In the context of the massive financial growth in the Ethiopian example, an independent report by Global Financial Integrity estimates that the country lost over 11.7 billion dollars in illicit financial outflows over the last decade.[6] These assets, which might have served in the further expansion of Ethiopia's economic and human development potential, have instead been redirected for purposes unknown. Indeed, portions could have been funneled in support of international terrorism and criminal activities including a range of illicit enterprises such as human trafficking rings or the financing of piracy in the Gulf of Aden. These challenges are not unique to Ethiopia, and many countries in the subregion, including Ethiopia, have made significant strides in strengthening their AML/CFT regimes over the past few years.

Curbing criminal and terrorist access to financial support depends on the financial integrity of all members of the international community. Strengthening national AML/CFT regimes, as well as regional cooperation on AML/CFT throughout the Horn of Africa, has been a key area of focus of international counterterrorism assistance to the subregion. Common AML/CFT program activities can include a range of legislative and policy related technical assistance and institutional capacity building projects—particularly the strengthening of national financial intelligence units. A cross-section of international support, particularly from Denmark and the United States, has served in enhancing platforms for subregional dialogue, awareness, technical assistance and capacity for strengthening national and regional AML/CFT infrastructure.[7]

Effective AML/CFT regulatory regimes also depend highly on the capacity of national criminal justice systems and strong cross-border legal cooperation to properly investigate and prosecute financial crime and prevent the financing of terrorism.[8] Due to the cross-border nature and transnational risks posed by money laundering and terrorist financing, a multi-sectoral regional approach is thus required to sustainably reduce the risk of illicit financial flows in the subregion. Robust financial oversight and reporting standards and expansive formal banking and revenue collection infrastructure provide the most advantageous environment for the implementation of a comprehensive regulatory oversight regime. However, the economic infrastructure and degree of financial inclusion across the subregion varies widely between rural and urban markets and across national contexts. Local economic activity for a vast majority of the subregion's population is overwhelmingly cash-based, though mobile money platforms are increasingly penetrating the region expanding financial access.

Ultimately, safeguarding the integrity of regional financial flows through regulatory and monitoring mechanisms will have limited impact on reducing the risks associated with money laundering and terrorist financing if not informed by a risk-based approach to AML/CFT, and aligned with efforts to strengthen financial access and inclusion, for example, through:
i) Supporting the development of national and regional guidance and good practices for the implementation of Financial Action Task Force (FATF) standards in the context of cash-based, low-income, and high-poverty economic contexts. There is a dearth of technical guidance on AML/CFT regime development in the context of the subregion's economic and risk environment. The development of detailed and practical case studies and guidance notes on implementing the FATF standards in the developmental and fragile contexts of the Horn of Africa would be extremely beneficial for national authorities in the subregion.[9]

ii) Facilitating dialogue and deepening a regional knowledge base on ways to strengthen regulatory oversight without restricting financial access or compromising financial inclusion. The heightened international pressure on the subregion and evidence of growing internal momentum for stronger AML/CFT in some national contexts, must not be at the expense of greater financial inclusion and poverty alleviation objectives.[10] Support for national and regional dialogues on enhancing financial integrity in a way that protects and economically empowers poor and marginalized populations can serve as the basis for developing innovative locally-owned solutions to regulatory challenges.

iii) Exploring trade-based financial, value-transfer, and remittance corridors across the greater subregion. While a baseline study of regulatory regimes and financial flows in the context of AML/CFT has already been undertaken in Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) member states by the IGAD Security Sector Program, a deeper understanding of the risks related to informal financial flows in neighboring Tanzania and Yemen would be useful for the delivery of targeted risk-based assistance and a more effective strategic approach to AML/CFT in the subregion.[11]

Criminal Justice Capacity and Cooperation to Counter Terrorism

Strengthening cross-border legal cooperation, information sharing, and investigation capacity has been a core component of civilian counterterrorism assistance to states in the greater Horn of Africa. This focus can be attributed to the transnational nature of terrorist activity in the subregion and revelations of ties between terrorist operatives in the Horn of Africa to attacks abroad.[12] Recognizing the need for a common legal cooperation framework to bring transnational criminals and terrorists to justice, the IGAD Council of Ministers approved Conventions on Extradition and Mutual Legal Assistance (MLA) in 2009 to help serve as the basis for cross-border criminal justice cooperation based on transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. Though the implementation of extradition and MLA agreements continues to be the focus of a number of international technical assistance agendas, effective legal cooperation based on domestic legislation requires strong interagency coordination at the national level and is subject to internal regulations, safeguards, and standard operating procedures in each respective national jurisdiction.[13]
In addition to the highly technical field of cross-border legal cooperation, international counterterrorism assistance to the subregion has increasingly focused on enhancing criminal justice capacities to counter terrorism ‘in accordance with the rule of law while protecting human rights’. Isolated from national justice and police reform initiatives, the impact of these efforts remains unclear. Though far from unique to the Horn of Africa, the pretext of counterterrorism has been used in different contexts to persecute minority groups and political opposition, silence critical voices in the media and civil society, and has served as the basis of measures which have exacerbated the insecurity of vulnerable communities.[14] This can add increased tension to already strained relationships between certain local constituencies, their governments, and the broader national community that encompasses them.

Often regardless of context, justice and security development assistance to the Horn of Africa —as elsewhere—generally focuses on enhancing the security and capacity of governments over the safety and empowerment of communities, and the same can be said of counterterrorism assistance.[15] Yet, the strengthening of state enforcement and external cooperation capacities as priorities of counterterrorism assistance, even in the context of ‘human rights’ and ‘rule of law’, are not substitutes for improved justice and policing for populations in the greater subregion.[16] As suggested in the opening of the GCTF’s Rabat Memorandum, effective criminal justice practices to counter terrorism “must be built on a functional criminal justice system that is capable of handling ordinary criminal offenses while protecting the human rights of the accused.”[17] Creating synergies between counterterrorism programming and broader national justice and security development initiatives is essential for building basic criminal justice capacity to address everyday challenges and institutional competence to address new challenges as they arise.[18] There are a number of opportunities to strengthen both core criminal justice service delivery, as well as enhance national interagency capacity and coordination and regional cooperation to counter transnational terrorism. The following ideas can help guide such an approach:

i) Exploring linkages between counterterrorism and justice and security development needs. Capacities essential for an effective criminal justice system, such as evidence gathering and forensics, standard operating procedures, case management, criminal procedure, interagency and police-prosecution cooperation, management and administration, as well as oversight and accountability mechanisms, are equally essential for countering terrorism. Where these core capacities are weak, assistance may be better delivered through broader support to national justice and security system development initiatives.[19]

ii) Developing national and regional training capacity in human rights-compliant criminal justice practices. Claims that investigation techniques grounded in human rights and the rule of law are both strategically and tactically superior to coercive techniques are too infrequently supported by concrete practical instruction.[20] Stronger long-term partnerships should be made with states in the region to strengthen law enforcement
training infrastructure capable of disseminating these practices, not only in the context of counterterrorism, but as a core element of good policing for public security.

iii) Supporting community-police partnerships to address local security concerns, and encouraging professional and accountable policing. Law enforcement capacity for counterterrorism can be either strengthened or hindered on the basis of a community’s relationship with local police forces. Supporting direct upstream community-police partnerships can help enhance public safety, strengthen police accountability and professionalism, and improve local perceptions of state legitimacy, providing a stronger foundation for more effective national and subregional criminal justice cooperation.

Countering Violent Extremism

The threats posed by al-Shabaab and al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and their continued ability to attract recruits across borders have been significant factors behind the CVE-focus of international counterterrorism programming in the greater subregion. A UN report in July 2011 suggested that non-Somali Kenyan youth formed a particularly active role within al-Shabaab.[22] There have since been increasing concerns that marginalized segments of the subregion’s growing youth population could be particularly vulnerable to violent extremism.[23] Reports have described how radical clerics and small circles of dedicated followers lure local youths of poor marginalized communities by offering a sense of belonging, a compelling world-view, and a small stipend (with the promise of more) to join al-Shabaab’s cause by taking up arms in Somalia, abroad, or even closer to home.[24]

At the same time, terrorist groups in the subregion have become well-known for their use of the internet and social networking platforms to effectively reach out to wider global audiences. Following Kenya’s intervention in southern Somalia in late 2011, Al-Shabaab took the battle to the world wide web, engaging in a drawn out war of words on Twitter with the Kenya Defence Force spokesman.[25] Their latest Twitter account was shutdown in the immediate aftermath of the September 2013 Westgate attack.[26] Anwar al Awlaki, former editor of AQAP’s English-language periodical Inspire, whose extremist rhetoric was widely circulated among radicals world-wide via the web, was based in Yemen for a number of years before being killed by an American drone strike in 2011.[27] The savvy use of new media by extremist groups in the subregion, if not a prime factor behind local terrorist recruitment, has figured prominently in influencing the ideas of violent extremists and terrorists well beyond the greater Horn.[28]

International CVE and CVE-related assistance in the Horn of Africa is diverse in character, often delivered through grassroots level programming in collaboration with civil society, and in some cases, directly in partnership with local communities.[29] CVE programming at the community level can be an extremely sensitive endeavor, and must be carefully tailored according to the context in which being implemented. The dynamics of an individual’s connection to their community, community perceptions of the state, and the nature of these relationships in a broader socio-economic and political environment, are of particular
relevance in the context of efforts to counter violent extremism.[30] The sometimes contentious nature of community relations with national governments may impede the development and implementation of CVE activities in certain subregional contexts.[31] However, government capacity building is not an area to be neglected and there are international assistance projects aimed at equipping local officials to, for example, better respond to CVE challenges in a way that enhances their credibility and legitimacy among local communities; as well as programs to support special detention programs aimed at disengaging incarcerated violent extremists from their former cause.

The effectiveness of CVE programming in the Horn of Africa—as elsewhere—will depend on the extent to which it is fit for purpose and tailored to context. It is not possible to attribute a single set of ‘push’ or ‘pull’ factors to explain why certain individuals are attracted to violent extremism and driven to engage in acts of terrorism.[32] Defining entire demographics by a presumed vulnerability to violent extremism may risk securitizing already marginalized communities rather than addressing potentially dramatic sources of community insecurity. CVE-related programming may be best approached through needs-based community or civil society programming designed to achieve CVE-objectives indirectly. The following ideas for grassroots-level engagement can help inform preliminary steps toward such an approach in certain contexts:

i) Frame interventions in partnership with communities in accordance with their perceptions of insecurity. Mapping community perceptions of local sources of insecurity can help inform the design of grassroots-level programming to address CVE-related objectives tailored to local context.[33] Mapping studies should be undertaken by locally credible researchers or by community members themselves using a mixture of methods in a highly-localized setting within the specific community that will benefit from the program.

ii) Facilitate trust-building, and joint training activities between communities, civil society and local authorities. Facilitating direct community member-police officer collaboration in the joint development of community safety strategies, or through joint community-police training activities can serve in empowering community members and local authorities as mutually accountable partners for the betterment of their shared community.[34] When community-police relations are built on trust and mutual respect, community members will have a greater willingness to cooperate and share information with local officers for more effective crime and terrorism prevention.

iii) Support localized and high-impact civic education, empowerment, leadership, and entrepreneurial initiatives for marginalized populations. While not directly related to risks of violent extremism, many communities in the greater Horn of Africa face conditions of acute deprivation and socio-political marginalization. Alleviating these conditions through dynamic grassroots projects can help strengthen community cohesion and resilience to a range of internal and external stresses, including violent
extremism. Small grants to support credible local projects on civic engagement, education, or entrepreneurial activities can have an enormous impact on a community’s sense of empowerment, particularly contexts of fragility and marginalization.[35]

Toward a Regional Risk Reduction Strategy

The evolving complexity of development and security challenges in the Horn of Africa has led to the elaboration and refinement of subregion-specific strategies meant to guide the delivery of coordinated development and security assistance.[36] Indeed, some of these assistance packages have come to incorporate specific civilian counterterrorism and CVE-oriented objectives alongside or encompassed within broader assistance strategies. However, a rift continues to exist between conceptualizing these relationships on paper and practically linking them in program delivery. The following overarching principles, while not at all meant to be comprehensive, should be taken into special consideration by donor governments providing counterterrorism assistance to the greater subregion:

i) Set priorities, develop objectives and design programming in collaboration with local partners in accordance with local context and local needs. ‘Promoting local ownership’ cannot be left until after program priorities have already been formulated. The most crucial period for local partners to assert ownership over an initiative is during the inception and design phases where core local stakeholders can directly influence the terms and objectives of a program.

ii) Formulate whole-of-government approaches to assistance delivery in alignment with goals defined by partners. Donor governments should work to ensure coordination across different domestic agencies delivering international assistance in national and regional contexts. The formulation of overarching national and regional strategies that link integrated activity- and component-specific objectives under larger strategic goals can help bring logical coherence to donor assistance. Intra- and inter-governmental communication for coordinated assistance delivery in the field through country missions across the subregion can serve to enhance the tactical coordination of assistance delivery, and provide an important feedback loop to ensure strategic alignment under a common regional perspective.

iii) Conduct more rigorous assessments and evaluations with the aim of building a stronger regional community of practice. Context-specific needs assessments and program evaluations are essential for measuring progress and identifying remaining gaps. This information should be used to build a stronger regional community of practice and knowledge-sharing for the delivery of more effective and targeted assistance partnerships among local and international partners.
Conclusion

This article highlighted a number of starting points for a critical reexamination of existing counterterrorism assistance efforts to the Horn of Africa, and how they might be better aligned for sustainable impact. If terrorism is a long-term challenge, then sustainable support for long-term solutions is required to address it. The challenges posed by various manifestations of terrorism in the greater Horn of Africa are deeply intertwined with those related to good governance, economic development, and human security. As the nature, scope and extent of civilian counterterrorism assistance to the greater Horn of Africa has become increasingly diverse, the time is ripe to reflect on how counterterrorism fits in the long view of the development and security challenges of the subregion.

There have been a number of significant achievements in civilian counterterrorism assistance to the Horn of Africa. To capitalize on these gains and contribute toward sustainably reducing risks posed by terrorism in the long term, more must be done to ensure counterterrorism assistance is aligned with broader efforts to address the complex development and security needs of both governments and communities in the subregion. A regional risk reduction strategy must deconstruct the conceptual barriers that have long siloed the counterterrorism, human security, national security and development assistance agendas in the subregion. This requires an approach that not only builds on the interplay of different streams of counterterrorism assistance, but on synergies across the broader local, national, and subregional development and security initiatives as well.

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Notes

[1] In this policy brief, the greater Horn of Africa refers to Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) member states: Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda; as well as Tanzania and Yemen.


PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

Volume 7, Issue 6


[9] Note that FATF’s guidance on “Anti-Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing Measures and Financial Inclusion” (2013) offers useful insight on the application of FATF recommendations in the context of financial inclusion in developing countries. This guidance is general in scope, and gives less attention to the technical challenges of institutional regime development in heavily cash-based economies with limited formal financial infrastructure.

[10] An instructive literature review undertaken by Andrew McDevitt at the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre’s (GSDRC’s) Research Helpdesk suggested that “AML initiatives are seen as particularly inappropriate for preventing and detecting money laundering in predominantly cash-based economies or in countries where reliance on parallel or informal transfer systems is the norm, as is the case in many developing countries. They are also seen as unduly restrictive on financial service providers working with low-income people, such as micro-finance institutions.” - Andrew McDevitt, “Helpdesk Research Report: Money Laundering and Poverty Reduction,” GSDRC (4 Nov 2009) http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/HD625.pdf.


[19] There is a consensus on the need to interlink mutually reinforcing streams of justice and security programme, see Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), OECD DAC Handbook on Security System Reform (2007).


