

Africa in the Wider World

Editor

Richard Downie

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9 | State Building Challenges in Africa

Robert D. Lamb

Many in the United States consider much of sub-Saharan Africa to be outside of U.S. strategic interests. Yet the United States often finds itself drawn into conflicts associated with what is often called Africa's "state failure" problem. But it is increasingly questionable whether the standard approaches to strengthening fragile states and preventing state failure are based on sound assumptions. The natural response is to try to strengthen state institutions. But when the groups in control of those institutions are part of the problem, the standard approaches would seem inadequate to the task at hand.

Two years ago, a half-hour documentary, "Kony 2012," was viewed by more than a hundred million people in a week, as individual recommendations to watch it grew exponentially through social networks worldwide. The documentary was criticized for oversimplifying a complicated issue, but it had the effect of raising awareness of the atrocities perpetuated by Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) against innocent people in significant parts of central Africa. U.S. military personnel were already working with Uganda in the hunt for Kony, but in 2012 that effort was escalated and incorporated into an African Union regional task force, which today the United States supports with personnel, aircraft, advice, and aid.

This international effort—to find and neutralize a shadowy group operating in areas with little or no state presence—has met with some success, as LRA activities have receded. But even as progress was being made there, another shadowy group operating in areas outside of state control in Africa was on the rise. An Islamist group called Boko Haram has increased its activities against targets mainly in northern Nigeria and the surrounding region. Most notoriously it kidnapped nearly 300 schoolgirls in April 2014, shocking news that raised awareness worldwide about this insurgent group that the United States designates as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. The girls' whereabouts remain unknown and Boko Haram continues to operate in remote regions.

In the Central African Republic, a rebel coalition took the capital city and deposed the president last year in a civil war that continues today. South Sudan earned hard-won independence from its northern neighbor in 2011 but later fell to in-fighting that resulted in civil war. Mali saw armed conflict break out in its north in early 2012, followed a couple of months later by a coup in the capital (in the south) and further conflict, to which French troops eventually responded.

What all of these events have in common is violence emerging from areas that are not controlled by any state entities. Such areas are sometimes called "ungoverned" but that is not often an accurate description. Certainly national governments are not in control. But in many such places, local authorities have always existed—they just have not been

incorporated into national institutions. In fact, an important reason there is such a weak state presence in such areas is the historically fraught relationships between the groups that control the capital city (and therefore enjoy international recognition as state actors) and the groups that control territories far removed from the capital (and therefore are afforded no such recognition, dismissed as “nonstate” actors). Partnering with the Ugandan and Nigerian militaries might seem a reasonable way to counter the LRA or Boko Haram, but strengthening those militaries cannot resolve the underlying fact that they have been abusive against their own populations and therefore risks furthering conflicts.

The United States is almost certain to continue to be drawn into Africa’s conflicts. According to CSIS data, the United States does not intervene in 80 percent of the dozens of foreign crises that emerge every year. But about every two months, on average, it does take concrete steps to try to influence the outcomes of conflicts becoming or threatening to become violent. Most of the time, the U.S. assets brought to bear are not military, but civilian—diplomacy, aid, trade, and finance. How the United States uses these assets has long been a subject of concern. Civilian power is not always deployed as strategically as global demands require, and there are questions whether the capabilities and cultures of civilian agencies (and the support offered to civilian staff and their families) are appropriate to challenges such as preventing or stabilizing complex conflicts, managing difficult relationships, and building resilience against violent ideologies and attacks.

The problem is that many of these conflicts involve tensions between state and nonstate actors, and U.S. civilian agencies are generally set up to engage with state actors—a bias that does not always help and sometimes harms the ability to influence events constructively. In the absence of more inclusive political settlements, standard development approaches, including institutional capacity building, do not generally contribute to stable political or economic systems. There is a need, therefore, to take a less reactive approach to these conflicts and to improve the way the United States engages with countries and peoples faced with fragility, corruption, ethnic conflict, regional tensions, or violence.