

Lessons Learnt from Countering Militant Groups in Africa

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Abstract

Much ink has been spilt in recent years attempting to unpack the seemingly interminable insurgencies that plague some fragile states in Africa. The drum beat of insights that emerged thumps home the common themes long scrutinized by scholars and astute observers of African insurgencies, namely how the combination of dysfunctional governance with weak and undisciplined defense and security forces (DSF) contribute to the rise and resilience of militant groups. Time and again and across disparate fragile countries in Africa, glaring deficiencies in governance, particularly in the areas of justice, defense, and law enforcement, have enabled and fueled insurgent activity. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that in some countries that have been engulfed by violent militancy, governments and their security forces have been their own worst enemies. Instead of undertaking the political, socio-economic and security reforms necessary to improve governments' legitimacy and fill counterinsurgency capability gaps, governments tend to double down on militarized interventions (arming militias, arbitrary arrests, systematic closing of markets, impositions of curfews, and so on) to halt insurgencies. These measures often end up further eroding local livelihoods, exacerbating communal frictions, and damaging state-society trust.

In the few cases where governments with limited resources and low state capacity have made inroads against militants, governments have generally made efforts to understand the nature of the threat and then respond with security reforms, community engagement, improvement in public service delivery, and dialogue with militants. Mauritania and Niger (before the July 2023 coup) are examples where leaders exhibited the political will to address the drivers of insurgency while fighting the militants and providing recourse for dialogue and reconciliation. In Coastal West Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, which was once ravaged by internal conflict, offers several important lessons in how to counter emerging militant groups. Abidjan's efforts to reorganize and align security and economic interventions have hitherto forestalled an emerging insurgency from taking root within communities along its long and vulnerable 630 kilometers border with Burkina Faso and Mali. In East Africa, Kenya provides a good case of the opportunities of balancing national leadership with local ownership in countering militant insurgency.

All these cases show what is possible when authorities make a candid effort to understand the threat and then craft integrated strategies designed not only to extend state capability and presence but also improve governments' legitimacy and build confidence between security services and aggrieved communities. Each context is different, but the cases' commonalities help illustrate what works and what does not in countering militant groups. This paper focuses on identifying these core factors of successful or otherwise failing counterinsurgency campaigns. These factors are derived from an analysis of the studies on countering militant groups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, and Kenya as well as the several workshops that the author has led on identifying best practices for countering violent militancy in Africa.