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Al-Qaeda Terrorism and Islamist Extremism in East Africa (ARI)

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Theme: Chaos in Somalia has created opportunities that have been exploited by radical groups with links to al-Qaeda.

Summary: East Africa has been a sanctuary and base for Islamist terrorist operations since the early 1990s and remains a priority area in al-Qaeda's global strategy. Geographic proximity and social, cultural, and religious affinities between East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula make the former susceptible to infiltration by militants and ideologies from the Middle East. The chaos in Somalia has created opportunities that have been exploited by radical groups with links to al-Qaeda, in particular the *Shabaab* militia, which as of this writing has taken control of southern Somalia and threatens to overpower the Transitional Federal Government in Mogadishu headed by a moderate Islamist, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, and backed by the US, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and other African countries. This is not to suggest that East Africa is necessarily fertile soil for radical Islamism. Although Salafism has made inroads among the educated elites, traditional and Sufi practices continue to predominate among the mass of the Muslim populations in the region. Despite the *Shabaab's* advances in the last several months, it is by no means a foregone conclusion that the radical Islamists will prevail. A plausible outcome is the reassertion of anti-radical forces, leading to a protracted struggle, with the ever-present risk of renewed external intervention if the new Somali government falters.

Analysis: From the mid-1990s, East Africa –together with Yemen, which is part of the same geopolitical region– has been a central theatre of al-Qaeda operations. In 1992 and 1993, after the overthrow of the Somali dictator Mohammed Siad Barre, al-Qaeda's then-deputy military chief Muhammad Atef made several trips to Somalia from al-Qaeda's base in Khartoum. The Harmony documents on Somalia suggest that while al-Qaeda's primary objective in Somalia appears to have been to establish working relations with Somali militants and to establish training camps in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia and in Somalia, Kenya was a more conducive setting for carrying out operations. The documents paint a portrait of al-Qaeda cells operating freely in Kenya without concern about being monitored or detained by the authorities.[1]

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[1] The Harmony documents on Somalia consist of several hundred pages of transcripts, all but one attributed to al-Qaeda operatives. They were released for a report entitled "Al-Qa'ida (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa," West Point, N.Y.: United States Military Academy, Harmony Project, 2006.

Al-Qaeda's military chief, Ali al-Rashidi, alias Abu Ubadiah al-Banshiri, drowned in Lake Victoria in May 1996 while preparing the bombings of American embassies in East Africa.[2] Planning for African operations continued after al-Banshiri's death and al-Qaeda's expulsion from the Sudan in 1996. In August 1998, al-Qaeda carried out two of its most spectacular pre-9/11 terrorist attacks: the suicide bombings of the American embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. In November 2002, al-Qaeda conducted two nearly simultaneous attacks in Kenya: the car bombing of the Paradise Hotel and the failed surface-to-air missile attack on an Israeli charter aircraft taking off from Mombasa airport.

Although al-Qaeda represents the primary terrorist threat to US, Western and allied interests in East Africa, it is only one component of a much larger universe of radical Islamist groups and organisations in the region. There are numerous indigenous radical Islamist groups in East Africa with varying degrees of affinity with al-Qaeda's agenda. There are also missionary groups, many funded by Saudi charities, actively propagating a radical Salafist interpretation of Islam that, while not necessarily violent, function as gateways to terrorism.

Al-Qaeda's strategy, in East Africa as elsewhere, has been to incorporate local militants into the global jihad. The global jihadist movement gains strength to the extent that it can co-opt local struggles. Nevertheless, even local groups with the greatest affinity for al-Qaeda have their own parochial agendas. Therefore, it is important to understand the nature and agenda of local Islamist groups, their relationship to transnational movements –particularly al-Qaeda and other components of the global jihadists movement–, the considerations that might lead them to cooperate with al-Qaeda and the contradictions and frictions that inevitably arise between al-Qaeda's global vision and the national agendas that many local groups naturally pursue.

The Influence of the East African Environment

Geographical proximity and social, cultural and religious affinities between East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, weak or collapsed governments, porous borders and the prevalence of the informal economy make East Africa susceptible to infiltration by militants and radical ideologies from outside the region. Weak governments and political and social disorder throughout the region create an environment in which informal power structures –including armed Islamist groups– flourish. The rise of al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI) in central Somalia after the collapse of the Siad Barre dictatorship is a case in point.

State presence in border areas is marginal throughout the region. Kenya's border with Somalia, for instance, is thinly populated, largely by ethnic Somalis. Although there are nominal customs checkpoints at the main entry points, the rest of the border is rarely patrolled and there are many smuggling routes.[3] Maritime and coastal surveillance is minimal. The waters adjacent to the Horn of Africa have become one of the most piracy-prone maritime areas in the world. The informal sector (in some cases institutionalised by corrupt customs, border and police officials) offers terrorist networks opportunities to launder money, transport funds and carry out the financial transactions that they need to operate.

[2] Al-Banshiri was a passenger on the Bukova-Mwanza ferry, which capsized with 480 passengers on board. Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 26.

[3] Human Rights Watch, *Playing with Fire: Weapons Proliferation, Political Violence, and Human Rights in Kenya,* May 2002.

This is not to suggest that East Africa is necessarily fertile soil for radical Islamism. Although Salafism has made inroads among the educated elites, traditional and Sufi practices continue to predominate among the mass of the Muslim population. Somali Islam, for instance, is strongly characterised by local traditions and syncretic practices, such as the *duco* (intercessory prayer after *salaat* in the mosque), the ecstatic *digri* ceremonies, the *siyaaro* or pilgrimages to the tombs of saints (practiced in particular by Sufis) and the celebration of *Mawliid* (the Prophet Muhammad's birthday).[4] These practices are strongly opposed by Salafis and Wahhabis. Despite the effects of such externalities as the proliferation of Gulf charities in the region, the strength of traditional Islam rooted in local cultures acts to retard the spread of extremist ideas.

In assessing East Africa's conduciveness to terrorism, a distinction must be made between Kenya and Tanzania, which provide a different type of environment for terrorist networks by virtue of their relatively high degree of bureaucratisation, and Somalia, which has been in a condition of statelessness since the fall of the Siad Barre regime in 1991. The large urban areas of Kenya and Tanzania, along with their somewhat functional infrastructures and reasonably ordered societies, give outsiders the anonymity and resources they need to build their networks.

In contrast, in Somalia, with its dense clan-based social connections, the authorities (to the extent that they are present) have a capacity for close surveillance of outsiders. This makes Somalia a difficult place for outsiders, unless they have the protection of local groups. Documents from al-Qaeda operatives in Somalia in the 1990s, published in the Harmony series, present evidence that they found Somalia a relatively inhospitable and challenging environment.[5] Although outsiders might succeed in co-opting a local group, the segmentation of social groups and the nature of social relationships would limit their capacity to extend their influence. This makes Kenya and Tanzania more conducive to the development of terrorist networks, even if Somalia becomes a refuge for some of them.[6]

Growth of Radical Islam

The growth of radical Islam in East Africa in recent decades manifested itself in the spread of Salafi and Wahhabi ideologies, which put pressure on traditional and Sufi practices, and in the emergence of extremist and terrorist groups influenced by these ideologies. The development of radical Islam is due to the confluence of a number of socio-political factors, some of which have been at work in the Muslim world at large and others are specific to the East African region. At the source of Islamist radicalism in East Africa is ideological infiltration from the Arab world, particularly the spread of the Muslim Brotherhood, which in its Sudanese variety became a major vector for the propagation of political Salafism in East Africa.

Islamic charities have played an important role in the spread of radical Islam in East Africa, especially in Somalia and other areas where the collapse of state institutions has left them as the primary providers of health care, primary and secondary education, vocational training, orphanages and other social services as well as, of course, Islamic instruction. International NGOs have played a critical role in rebuilding Somali civil society

[4] Kenneth J. Menkhaus, 'Somalia and Somaliland: Terrorism, Political Islam, and State Collapse', in Robert I. Rotberg (Ed.), *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2004, p. 26.
[5] Combating Terrorism Center, 2006, p. 43.
[6] In Somalia institutions such as *xeer* (customary law) requires that one be connected to kinship networks if one is to get protection.

institutions, but in the process they have also displaced traditional institutions. Moreover, some charities also proselytise and promote an Arab-Islamist curriculum, engage in political activism and advocate the establishment of Islamic states. By providing social services, radical charities foster the acceptance of Salafi or Wahhabi ideologies by local populations, and in some cases legitimise, strengthen political support for and facilitate recruitment by extremist organisations.

Two catalytic events in East Africa –the 1989 Islamist-military take-over in the Sudan that brought to power the National Islamic Front (NIF) government, and the collapse of the Somali state after Siad Barre's overthrow in 1991– opened up political space that was then exploited by radical movements and organisations.

In the Sudan, in the early 1990s, the NIF sought to implement an Islamisation project centred on a re-education campaign to spread a Salafi interpretation of Islam beyond the intellectual and professional circles where it had originally taken root, and to spread its ideology internationally. For a time in the 1990s, Khartoum became the epicentre of radical Islamist activity in Africa. Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad all were represented in Khartoum and Osama bin Laden and several dozen 'Afghan Arabs' took up residence there. The project came to an end in the second half of the 1990s when the Sudan's military ruler, General Omar al-Bashir, turned against his erstwhile partner, the NIF ideologue Hassan al-Turabi and ousted him and his supporters from positions of power.

In Somalia, radical movements emerged as armed factions. Since its appearance in central Somalia in the early l990s, the most active extremist movement in the Horn of Africa was AIAI, a group that, although linked to al-Qaeda, had its own separate agenda of establishing an Islamised Greater Somalia –the lands in the Horn of Africa inhabited by ethnic Somalis–. The AIAI was severely weakened in fighting with Ethiopian forces in 1995-96 and some leadership elements of AIAI morphed into the radical component of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) militia that seized Mogadishu in June 2006.

The UIC came to power in Mogadishu with the support of Hawiye clan elders and businessmen who welcomed the Courts' use of Islamic law to restore order in the city. The UIC's promise to provide security was the main reason for its popularity in the early stages of its rule. The courts removed the checkpoints, collected weapons from warlord militias and promoted Islam as a unifying alternative to clan loyalties. This arrangement worked for two or three months after the UIC take-over of Mogadishu but then began to fall apart because of tensions within the UIC between the mainstream and radical factions.

The mainstream faction was led by the UIC's Chairman Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed. Sheikh Sharif was educated in Mogadishu, Libya and the Sudan and was associated with the Ahlu Sunna wal Jama'a, a traditional Sufi association. The radical faction within the courts was led (with the notable exception of the *Shabaab* militia leader Adan Hashi Ayro) by individuals formerly associated with the AIAI. The radicals' source of power was the *Shabaab* ('the youth'), a corps of fanatical young Somalis trained and indoctrinated by the aforementioned Ayro with the assistance of foreign fighters.[7] Other militias loyal to the UIC did not have the same level of commitment; they were just clan militias paid to enforce the courts' writ. As their name suggests, most of the *Shabaab* were young men in

[7] It is not clear if these were al-Qaeda trainers or just foreign militants.

their late teens or early 20s who grew up in the civil war, held a rigid view of Islam and often acted in direct contradiction to the UIC's stated goals and objectives. The *Shabaab* also offered an alternative to the clan, drawing instead on a wide base of recruits from all clans.[8]

Within the radical faction there were divergences in strategy between its leading figure, Hassan Dahir Aweys, Deputy Chairman of the UIC, and his protégé, Ayro. Aweys' goal was essentially nationalist. He wanted to reabsorb all parts of greater Somalia –the lands in the Horn of Africa where ethnic Somalis predominate– into a single state ruled by *shari'a*.[9] Ayro's goal was to link the struggle in Somalia to the global jihad. This view is given credence by Ayro's links to al-Qaeda and protection, that he extended to senior al-Qaeda figures such as Abu Talha al-Sudani (alias Tariq Abdullah) and Fazul Mohammed ('the Comoran').

The radicalisation of the UIC and its ever-stricter enforcement of Islamic law, which infringed on traditional Somali values and customs, lost it support among the population. The UIC's efforts to ban the use of *khat*, a narcotic leaf commonly consumed throughout the Somali cultural zone, provoked a great deal of opposition and even riots.[10] Although the UIC was weakened by internal divisions and growing unpopularity due to its religious coercion, its mishandling of relations with Ethiopia led directly to its downfall. After the UIC seized control of Mogadishu, it moved to extend its control to the north and the south and threatened the internationally-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG), based in Baidoa, an inland town north-west of Mogadishu.

Ethiopia's perception of the threat that the UIC government presented to its vital interests, including the UIC's backing of secessionists in the Ogaden, ties to Ethiopia's arch-enemy Eritrea and concern that an Islamist government in Somalia might stimulate the radicalisation of its own Muslim population led to the decision to invade UIC-controlled territory and install the TFG led by former Puntland warlord Abdullahi Yusuf in Mogadishu in January 2007. Although driven out by the Ethiopian invasion, the core of the UIC fighting force, the radical *Shabaab* militia, remained intact.

Having been installed in power by Somalia's traditional enemy, Ethiopia, the TFG started its rule in Mogadishu with a significant political disadvantage. In the view of most analysts, there was a window of opportunity after the UIC fled Mogadishu for the TFG to demonstrate its ability to provide security and prevent the re-emergence of warlordism, but the TFG squandered this opportunity.

Some of the more thoughtful regional government officials and analysts believed that continued conflict could only be prevented by a political settlement among the Somali factions. This would have required an agreement with the moderate sector of the Somali opposition based in Asmara or, at the very least, with Mogadishu's dominant clan, the

[8] 'The Fight for Mogadishu: The Rise and Fall of the Islamic Courts', Jamestown Foundation event, Washington DC, 28/II/2007. See also Andrew McGregor, 'The Leading Factions Behind the Somali Insurgency', Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 5, nr 8, 26/IV/ 2007; '"Extremist" Splinter Group of Somali Islamic Courts Formed', *Somaliland Times*, 12/VIII/2006.
[9] Interview with a Nairobi-based correspondent who travels frequently to Mogadishu, May 2007.
[10] 'The Fight for Mogadishu', 2007. However, according to a source familiar with social conditions in Somalia, there was actually a great deal of support for the banning of the *khat*. The demonstrators were those affected by the ban (sellers) and consumers, but many Somalis, including some who chewed it, were for the banning but thought that the courts needed to take account of the needs of the mainly women vendors who were raising their families on the money they earned from selling *khat*.

Hawiye, who had largely been left out of the political process. Such an agreement could have progressively reduced the popularity and strength of the Islamists. Instead, Yusuf and the Ethiopians opted for a military solution. Predictably, this effort failed and the *Shabaab,* which led the armed opposition to the Ethiopian occupation, grew in strength.

An upsurge in suicide bombings, a tactic associated with al-Qaeda and affiliated groups, but previously unknown in Somalia, indicated a change in the character of the conflict. The first suicide attack reported in Somalia was in Baidoa in September 2006, targeting the TFG President Yusuf. The blast and a subsequent gun battle killed Yusuf's brother and 10 others. In May 2007, Ugandan peacekeepers stationed at the port of Mogadishu arrested a man who was attempting a suicide bombing.[11] Another suicide bomber, 'Martyr Adam Salad Adam', made a video in which he is seen reciting from the Quran and urging Somalis to defend their country against 'invaders'. He later is seen driving off into the distance and exploding, apparently near Ethiopian troops.[12] In June 2007, a suicide bomber crashed a Toyota Land Cruiser loaded with explosives through the security gate of the TFG Prime Minister Geedi's home in Mogadishu and detonated them, killing six guards and damaging the building.[13]

After the Ethiopian occupation of Mogadishu, the *Shabaab* intensified its operations in central and southern Somalia, importing Iraqi tactics of roadside bombs and targeted assassinations. The *Shabaab* militia also sought to draw TFG and Ethiopian forces from Mogadishu by capturing and briefly holding towns, while avoiding open encounters with the Ethiopian army.[14] Through these actions, the *Shabaab* and other radicals sought to harness Somali nationalism to their cause. Incidents such as the al-Hidayat mosque episode in Mogadishu in April 2008, in which, according to eyewitnesses, Ethiopian troops entered the mosque and killed 11 civilians, including the imam of the mosque, played into the hands of the radicals.[15]

The killing of the *Shabaab*'s military leader Ayro and several of his commanders in a US air strike on their hideout on 1 May 2008 did not change the military balance. By the end of 2008, the *Shabaab* advanced from its stronghold in the southern Somali port of Kismayo to the outskirts of Mogadishu. Three inter-related developments, a UN-brokered agreement between Sheikh Sharif, the former UIC chairman and leader of the moderate faction in the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (known as ARS-Djibouti after Sheikh Sharif, angered by Eritrea's interference in the affairs of the ARS, moved his office to Djibouti), and the TGS Prime Minister Nur Adde, the Ethiopian decision to withdraw from Mogadishu and Yusuf's resignation on 29 December 2008 and his replacement as TFG President by Sheikh Sharif on 30 January 2009[16] changed the political dynamics in Somalia by broadening the base of the TFG and removing a major justification for the *Shabaab*-led insurgency. Sheikh Sharif's efforts to form an inclusive government were

[11] 'AU Forces Foil a Suicide Attack', SomaliNet, 7/V/2007.
[12] Elizabeth A. Kennedy, 'Somalian Tactics Hint of al-Qaeda', AP, 25/V/2007.
[13] 'Somali Prime Minister Survives Bomb Attack', CNN, 3/VI/2007.
[14] Sunguta West, 'Strategy of Somalia's Islamists Survives Death of Militant Leader', Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Focus*, vol. 5, nr 18, 6/V/2008.
[15] 'Slaughter in Mogadishu Mosque Inflames Somali Conflict', Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Focus*, vol. 5, nr 17, 30/IV/2008. The Ethiopians blamed the *Shabaab* for the killings.
[16] The agreement between Sheikh Sharif and Nur Adde (both members of the Hawiye clan), backed by the UN, the US and Ethiopia, isolated Yusuf (a Darood) and forced him to resign after he failed to persuade the TFG parliament to reject the deal. See Abdulaziz Al-Mutairi, 'Fall of Kismayo, TGS in Addis Ababa, Crumbling ARS and Puntland: Somalia under Spotlight', 17/IX/2008, www.qarannews.com/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=2399.

rejected by the Islamists, however. From Asmara, Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, head of the hard-line faction in the ARS (known as ARS-Asmara), denounced his former associate, Sheikh Sharif, as a traitor and an Ethiopian stooge.[17] The *Shabaab,* in turn, continued to launch attacks against the new TFG and a 3,500-strong African Union peacekeeping force from Uganda and Burundi (AMISOM), the only international force left in Mogadishu after the Ethiopians' withdrawal[18] (another 500 Burundian troops arrived in Mogadishu in March 2009, after two suicide bombings that killed 11 peacekeepers and wounded 15).[19]ç

The establishment of a unity government in Mogadishu initially brought about a degree of stability to central Somalia. Despite the continued violence, around 40,000 refugees returned to Mogadishu, according to the UN refugee agency (UNHCR). The *Shabaab,* however, continued its military offensive and in February 2009 captured Baidoa, the former seat of the TFG. More recently, the *Shabaab* took control of the town of Jowhar in the central province of Hiran, provoking an incursion by the Ethiopian Army into Hiran. The *Shabaab* is currently contesting the control over Mogadishu (according to news reports, the *Shabaab*'s leader was seriously wounded and possibly killed in what appears to be an accidental explosion at a safe house outside Mogadishu on 17 May 2009).[20]

Although the TFG only controls parts of Mogadishu, there are several factors that militate in favour of Sheikh Sharif's government. One is the strong support from the international community –including the Ethiopians, who two years before had ousted Sheikh Sharif's UIC government, but who now regard him as a barrier to radical Islamism–. At its meeting in Brussels in February 2009 the International Contact Group (ICG) on Somalia recognised the need to consolidate and support the new TFG. International donors pledged funding for new and renewed support to AMISOM, the Somali Joint Security Force, and the Somali Police Service, with a target of 10,000 police by the second quarter of 2010.[21]

A second factor is the lack of support among the majority of the Somalian population for the *Shabaab*'s radical Islamist agenda. As in other traditional societies, Somalia's own culture and social institutions might prove to be the strongest barrier to radical Islamism. With the Ethiopian withdrawal from Mogadishu in January 2009, the *Shabaab* also lost the primary justification for its armed struggle. There are already indications that clan-based militias have started to mobilise to oppose the *Shabaab*. After *Shabaab* fighters were accused of destroying tombs belonging to sheikhs revered by Sufis, clan militias fighting under the banner of the Sufi group Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jamee'a ousted *Shabaab* fighters from the central Somalian region of Galgadud.[22] Sheikh Sharif has sought to steal the Islamists' thunder by announcing that he would govern in accordance with Islamic law and that AMISOM would withdraw once Somalia is stable. Despite their advances in the last several months, it is by no means a foregone conclusion that the radical Islamists will prevail. A plausible outcome is the reassertion of anti-radical forces, leading to a

[17] 'Aweys: Sharif is a Traitor and an Ethiopian Stooge', Reuters, 5/III/2009, *http://forums.islamicawakening.com/showthread.php?p=213650*.
[18] 'New Somali Premier Calls for End to Bloodshed', *Somali News,* February 2009.
[19] 'Somalia: 500 African Union Peacekeepers Arrive in Mogadishu', *Garowe Online*, 3/III/2009.
[20] Bill Roggio, 'Report: Shabaab Leader Wounded in Mogadishu Explosion', *The Long War Journal*, 20/V/2009, *http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/05/report_shabaab_leade.php*.
[21] International Contact Group on Somalia Communiqué, 26-27/II/2009.
[22] 'Somalia: Al Shabaab Spokesman Says Not Part of Al Qaeda', *Garowe Online*, 4/III/2009, *http://www.garoweonline.com/artman2/publish/Somalia_27/Somalia_Al_Shabaab_spokesman_says_not_part_of_Al_Qaeda.shtml*.

protracted struggle, with the ever-present risk of renewed external intervention if the new TFG falters.

While Mogadishu and southern Somalia are the epicentres of al-Qaeda-linked movements, extremist groups are also believed to be present in other parts of the Horn of Africa and in Kenya and Tanzania. Somaliland and Puntland have experienced low levels of terrorist activity in recent years, but their governments have weak law enforcement and intelligence capabilities. Somaliland prides itself on its stability and the absence of extremism, but some believe that there is a strong underground Islamist movement there that could surface if the political situation deteriorates. Ethiopia is 50% Muslim and religion is a factor in the separatist movement in the Muslim-majority Oromo region as well as in the Ogaden.

In Kenya, radical Islamists are a minority in the Muslim population, but there are disaffected sectors of the Muslim community that see themselves as disadvantaged by the policies of the central government in Nairobi. Although, except for al-Qaeda cells believed to be present in Kenya, a locally-rooted terrorist movement has not yet emerged, there are concerns that some parts of the Muslim population could become radicalised and turn to violence.

Conclusion: The short-term question is whether the TFG will survive. If the *Shabaab* gains control of Somalia, the West will be confronted with a reconstituted terrorist sanctuary in this critical region. However, if the current *Shabaab* onslaught is turned back, the security situation in the Horn of Africa could begin to stabilise. The counterterrorism assistance programmes that are now being implemented in East Africa, with the support of the US and other Western countries could help to lay the groundwork for a more robust regime of counter-terrorism cooperation. Counter-terrorism assistance alone, however, is unlikely to provide an effective long-term solution to the challenges of Islamist extremism and terrorism in East Africa. An effective long-term solution would require attacking the conditions that make the region hospitable to extremist and terrorist elements. The overall aim should be to build a sustained national resilience that is intolerant of, and effective against, terrorists and extremists. This can only occur if hard security initiatives are linked to a broader array of policies designed to promote political, social and economic stability.

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