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The State of Terrorism Research in Africa

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Following the terrorist bombings of US embassies in Nairobi and Tanzania in 1998 and the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, Africa was immediately drawn into the global efforts for counter-terrorism. Terrorism has spread throughout the continent since then, from Al Qaeda and Al Shabaab in Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, to Boko Haram and the Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP) in the Lake Chad area. Central Africa is another epicentre of terrorism in the continent.

Expectedly, there has been an increase in terrorism and counter-terrorism research by both Africa-based and West-based scholars. Indeed, some researchers believe that the field is in its "golden age" (Silke & Schmidt-Petersen 2017, 9). However, Marc Sageman is sceptical; he highlights the absence of empirical data, weak methodologies, speculative studies and domination of the field by media experts. Sageman concludes that, despite the rise in knowledge, terrorism study is yet to be fully developed (Sageman, 2014). This assertion is particularly validated by trends in terrorism research in Africa.

Evidently, terrorism studies in Africa have provided insights into the emergence of terrorist organisations, their operationality and, their adverse socio-political and economic impacts. However, many of these works have focused on the same conversations for years. Many papers produced on terrorist groups are uncritical and ahistorical regurgitations and, they are based mainly on secondary sources (Smith, 2018; Solomon, 2015). The field has also been inundated with politicians, pro-state academics or 'friendly agents', and social media influencers (Personal Interview, 2021). These groups are drowning critical voices, especially the voices of Africa-based scholars who have devoted years to the study of terrorism.

Arguably, the silencing of African scholars is rooted in the paradox that led to the discursive institution of a dominant global terrorism debate between the pre-9/11 periods, which culminated in the 1998 Al Qaeda bombing in Kenya and Tanzania, and the post-9/11 years. In the pre-9/11 years, few critical voices had traced the roots of terrorist violence to the Western foreign policies in Africa and the Middle East region, particularly that of the US. Notably, during the Cold War, the US was claimed to have funded the Mujahedeen to conduct a proxy war in Muslim nations to counter the Soviet's influence in the region. While this contributed to the rise of terrorism, the backing of Israel by the US and the latter's attitude to the Palestinian question and war against the Taliban in Afghanistan effectively led terrorist organisations in the area to turn against it (Mamdani, 2004; Enweramdu & Njoku, 2012; Obwogo, 1999; Cooley, 1999). Despite these pre-9/11 conditions, the framing of 9/11 as a "temporal rupture," an age of "radical insecurity," and the antecedents of imminent attacks

created a situation in which discussions on the Western and US roles in the rise of terrorism in Africa and the MENA area were overrun (Jarvis, 2008, 245, 247).

Specifically, 9/11 was framed as unprecedented while Africa was represented as the epicentre of an impending era of great insecurity. This is evident in Susan Rice's comments that Africa is the "soft underbelly for global terrorism" and a "veritable incubator for terrorism's foot soldiers"(Smith, 2018, 390). Consequently, Africa was securitised, and African governments and, African domestic and international organisations, were politically and economically mobilised for the War on Terrorism (WoT). The 9/11 temporal narrative and the WoT, on the other hand, became pretexts for African governments to enact terrorism laws that glossed over human rights and civil liberties by repressing credible oppositions and civil societies and muzzling other critical voices (Njoku, 2020). Consequently, the temporal turn that the 9/11 discourse enshrined also canonised the exceptionality of the attack and effectively rationalised violent retaliation, suppression and punishment of critical voices (Toros, 2017). It also shifted attention away from the West's involvement in the growth of terrorism in Africa.

I argue that the epochal enthroning of 9/11 made the reading of terrorism in Africa among African-based researchers increasingly ahistorical and uncritical. Indeed, African-based voices have contributed to state-centred and state-controlled scholarship in terrorism studies. Critical engagements and research are few, and the prevalent information about Al Qaeda, Al Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISWAP is yet to move beyond centring the state and its security agenda. Bart Schuurman underscores the state-centric nature of terrorism studies in a review of 3,442 terrorism articles published between 2007 and 2016 (Schuurman 2019). Arguably, state actors in Africa have often directed or dictated the tone of terrorism research by engaging various individuals in seminars, symposiums and workshops on security or terrorism. Most discourses emanating from such are largely self-congratulatory or, at best, reiterating what is already known. Debates revealing how state actors' use the language of terrorism to close civic spaces are few (Njoku, 2020, 2021). Because these identifiable gaps are ignored, questionable counter-terrorism approaches are spreading, sometimes with the implication that the government is inadvertently furthering terrorists' goals.

In advancing the field, Africa-based researchers must engage the requisite issues with critical lenses. Additionally, the silencing of African scholarly voices by Western hegemonies which operate as gatekeepers on terrorism studies must be confronted. A careful observer would note only a few non-Western members exist in the editorial boards of the five leading terrorism journals – *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *Perspective of Terrorism*, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* and *Journal of De-radicalisation*. This is despite the fact that, in recent years, many of the works produced about terrorism in Africa and the MENA region have appeared in these journals. This suggests that the Africans in the field must engage in the decolonisation of both knowledge (Mitova, 2020) and terrorism studies (Mohammed, 2021).

Through public debates, African-based researchers must resist certain Western voices on terrorism that discursively normalise improprieties on the continent. This is exigent in the light of recent allegations of states' possible complicity in the protraction of terrorism. A Nigerian Minister of Information and Communication Technology was asked to resign his post because of his documented support of Al Qaeda (*The Guardian*, 2021). Some Western scholars questioned the rationale for labelling the minister a terrorist since he had supported efforts in defeating Boko Haram and ISWAP (*Daily Trust,* 2021). The question, then, is, would someone who had pledged support for Al Qaeda in the past be made a minister in the US or UK? How are practices that the states of the West take as dreadful cynically get framed as normal and appropriate for Africa?

In conclusion, while scholars have advanced our understanding of terrorists and the impacts of their activities, the field needs to move beyond flogged issues and the centring of state security agendas. Africa-based scholars must get involved in the adoption of critical approaches to articulate new questions and, produce concepts and methodological designs in terrorism studies. They should assert their voices in public debates towards decolonising the field.

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