



Combating Terrorism Center
AT WEST POINT

Assessing U.S. Counterterrorism in Africa, 2001-2021: Summary Document of CTC's Africa Regional Workshop

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The assessments contained herein represent summaries of discussions of a workshop that brought together experts with an array of backgrounds, expertise, and outlooks on U.S. counterterrorism policy in Africa in order to ask difficult and critical questions to inform debate, scholarship, and policy. This summary document only captures the views and perspectives of a diverse collection of specialists on these topics. The claims made herein are not in and of themselves necessarily the results of formal assessments or investigations by members associated with this group or others. The CTC has elected to make the summary of this workshop publicly available because it believes that the points raised herein have the ability to inform better policy, scholarship, and outcomes related to the provision of peace and security on the African continent.

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Overview

On October 21, 2021, the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point, as part of the Recrudescence Project, hosted a closed-door workshop with 18 top observers of U.S.-Africa policy from across government, academia, think-tanks, and the private sector. The goal of CTC's Africa Regional Workshop was to assess the successes and challenges of U.S. policy to address terrorism by violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and to assist in counterterrorism (CT) efforts on the African continent over the past 20 years (2001-2021), and to consider how these approaches might be improved in the future. This anonymized summary document offers an overview of the findings from that workshop. Three topics of concern are the focus of this summary: assessments of U.S. *kinetic* counterterrorism engagement in Africa; assessments of U.S. *non-kinetic* counterterrorism engagement in Africa; and the future of U.S.-Africa policy beyond a counterterrorism lens.

In broad terms, the workshop's discussions revealed a general assessment that despite its efforts, U.S. counterterrorism assistance in Africa between 2001-2021 has been lackluster at best and harmful at worst. The workshop's discussions underscored that U.S. efforts, in both the kinetic and non-kinetic realms, have tended to be most effective at bringing about short-term operational successes but generally not strategically successful in the long-term. Considering these insufficiencies, participants agreed that a rethink of broader U.S. engagement toward the continent is needed. This engagement would see a continued U.S. participation in both kinetic and non-kinetic counterterrorism efforts in Africa, but also involve a greater prioritization of democracy, good governance, and economic engagement over a dominating focus on security assistance. To the extent that U.S. counterterrorism assistance in Africa endures, participants underscored the need for its improvement.

The workshop's discussions emphasized the challenges that the United States has faced in its African counterterrorism efforts between 2001-2021. Beyond what many participants perceived to be a lack of coherence in U.S. policy, objectives, and internal coordination in African counterterrorism engagement, a recurring theme was the numerous challenges that the United States has faced in its on-the-ground engagement. Successive U.S. administrations have resorted to collaborating with non-democratic African regimes, whose buy-in for U.S. counterterrorism programming has often been either minimal or who have used the assistance from the United States for personal or regime-related purposes. When African governments have used U.S. counterterrorism assistance for personal purposes, they have often pushed their citizens toward—not away from—the very groups that such U.S. efforts have sought to combat. Simultaneously, groups associated with al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State can point toward collusion between the United States and repressive African governments to justify their existence and encourage citizen recruitment.

Despite these challenges, the workshop's discussions underscored that the United States has had some successes in the counterterrorism space in Africa between 2001-2021. Kinetically, it has succeeded in degrading the leadership and membership of African jihadi groups, cleared territory and slowed operations of these groups, and encouraged broader cooperation in the African counterterrorism space more generally. Non-kinetically, the United States has worked to



improve political, economic, and social conditions in ways that have—directly or indirectly—served to lessen the appeal of al-Qa`ida- and Islamic State-affiliated groups for African populations. The most cited best practice for non-kinetic counterterrorism approaches related to institutional reform in African security and justice sectors.

As the United States looks ahead, the workshop’s participants agreed that a significant rethink of Washington’s strategy toward African engagement is needed, not least as regards counterterrorism. In its bid to reverse what was perceived by participants to be a waning influence on the continent with the rise of new international competitors, the United States faces a difficult balancing act of picking the right partners, becoming a trusted and consistent ally, and ensuring, above all, that it can articulate a clear, principled rationale for engaging with the continent, including and beyond counterterrorism.

Introduction

On October 21, 2021, the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point hosted a closed-door workshop with 18 top observers of U.S.-Africa policy from across government, academia, think-tanks, and the private sector. The goal of CTC’s Africa Regional Workshop was to assess the successes and challenges of U.S. policy to address terrorism and assist in counterterrorism efforts on the African continent over the past 20 years (2001-2021), and to consider how these approaches might be improved in the future. This anonymized summary document offers an overview of the findings from that workshop. Three topics of concern are the focus of this summary: assessments of U.S. *kinetic* counterterrorism strategies in Africa; assessments of U.S. *non-kinetic* counterterrorism strategies in Africa; and the future of U.S.-Africa policy beyond a counterterrorism lens.

Participants

CTC’s Africa Regional Workshop consisted of 18 U.S.-based individuals, whose identities remain anonymous for the purpose of this summary document. These individuals were noted as being some of the foremost experts on U.S.-Africa relations broadly and/or on the U.S. role in African counterterrorism, security assistance, security sector reform, or related topics.

Participants hailed from various backgrounds, delineated below:

- **U.S. Government Officials:** Current and retired, many participants came from senior careers in the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. intelligence community, and professional military education (PME) institutions. Two former U.S. ambassadors to African states were also present.
- **Academics:** Several academics focused on U.S.-Africa policy and/or African terrorism and security issues were present, hailing from institutions around the United States.
- **Think-Tanks:** Leading experts on African affairs and especially U.S.-Africa policy from several major U.S. think-tanks were present.
- **Private Sector:** A small number of participants hailing from the private sector were present. These participants’ expertise related to security affairs and U.S. relations in Africa.

Of note, many individuals have affiliations that overlap with more than one of the above categories.

Structure

CTC’s Africa Regional Workshop consisted of three hour-long panels, the topics of which are delineated below. The meeting was private and invite-only, and was held virtually through Microsoft Teams.

Each panel began with a brief, seven-minute “keynote” by a workshop participant who laid out the contours of the history and debates around the topic in question. This keynote was intended to ensure that all participants had some common understandings of terms, debates, and baseline discussion points.

Each panel then consisted of five other pre-delineated participants giving two-minute answers to the panel’s primary question. Each participant was asked to articulate and briefly discuss one success/desirable approach and one failure/undesirable approach as related to U.S. counterterrorism policy in Africa.

Following the keynote (seven minutes) and five statements (10 minutes), an open conversation in which all 18 participants discussed the questions at hand ensued. These discussions were moderated by Jason Warner.



The meeting followed Chatham House rules. Comments were not for personal attribution. However, participants were made aware that an anonymized summary of the meeting would be produced and shared. Stephanie Lizzo and Julia Broomer took notes of those conversations. This summary document is the synthesis of those conversation points from Warner, Lizzo, and Broomer. As a final caveat, we note that this summary document only captures the views and perspectives of a diverse collection of specialists on these topics. The claims made herein are not in and of themselves necessarily the results of formal assessments or investigations by members associated with this group or others.

Panels

The three panels were as follows:

- **Panel 1: Assessing Kinetic U.S. Counterterrorism Approaches in Africa, 2001-2021**
What is your assessment—delineating both successes and failures—of U.S. kinetic approaches (both its own and its assistance to African states) to combat African terror groups since 2001?
- **Panel 2: Assessing Non-Kinetic U.S. Counterterrorism Approaches in Africa, 2001-2021**
What is your assessment—delineating both successes and failures—of U.S. non-kinetic approaches (both its own and its assistance to African states) to combat African terror groups since 2001?
- **Panel 3: Beyond Counterterrorism**
*As we look toward the future, how should the United States think about the relative balance between counterterrorism/security force assistance as compared to other forms of engagement with actors on the continent?
What is your assessment—delineating both desirable and undesirable approaches—as to how the United States should think about this balance?*

Summary Document Structure

This summary document details the broad findings and most salient discussion points of each of the above panels. Each of the ensuing three sections opens with broad takeaways from the panel. It then presents some of the primary successes/desirable approaches to the topic at hand before discussing challenges/undesirable approaches to the topic at hand. A fourth conclusion section of this summary offers a synthesis of the discussions and presents lingering questions to be broached in future iterations of the workshop.

Panel 1: Assessing Kinetic U.S. Counterterrorism Approaches in Africa, 2001-2021

In the first panel, the keynote and panelist participants were asked to answer the following question:

What is your assessment—delineating both successes and failures—of U.S. kinetic approaches (both its own and its assistance to African states) to combat African terror groups since 2001?

Summary of Broader Kinetic Discussion Takeaways

- **A consensus of U.S. counterterrorism inefficacy:** A general takeaway from participants was that U.S. kinetic counterterrorism efforts in Africa since 2001 have, overall, not been a success. This assessment was based on the rising number of attacks conducted by salafi-jihadi groups associated with al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State in Africa; the increased number of salafi-jihadi groups themselves; and the increased number of foreign terrorist organization (FTO)-listed groups and sanctioned individuals from Africa—all up substantially since 2001.
- **U.S. operational, not strategic successes:** A second broad consensus among participants was that U.S. kinetic counterterrorism policy in Africa since 2001 has seen many *operational* successes but overall has failed to achieve long-term, *strategic* success. See the following sections on specific kinetic successes and failures.
- **A U.S. presence that exacerbates, not attenuates, the appeal of groups:** Though debated, several participants argued that U.S. counterterrorism presence on the African continent since 2001 has arguably *strengthened*, not *weakened*, the appeal of jihadi actors. Jihadi groups can leverage foreign intervention by actors like the United States and France to justify their presence and necessity, and can point to U.S. assistance to often-violent host governments as a means of foreign and national collusion.
- **The United States needs to retain—but substantially improve—kinetic operations:** Despite the insufficiencies of kinetic U.S. counterterrorism efforts on the African continent since 2001, the problem of al-Qa`ida and Islamic State VEO violence remains significant. Participants noted that U.S. assistance for kinetic action against such groups



should not be abandoned, but rather should be coupled with much greater focus on non-kinetic, political, social, and economic development.

- **High risks, uncertain rewards:** The U.S. ability to address problems of terrorism in Africa via kinetic means seems to be limited, while its ability to do harm is significant.

Summary of Kinetic Successes

- **Short-term wins, long-term challenges:** When discussing U.S. successes in kinetic counterterrorism in Africa, a consensus among participants was that U.S. successes have primarily been *short-term*, ephemeral *operational and tactical* successes, and not *long-term*, sustainable *strategic* successes. A counterpoint from one participant was that the United States *has* been strategically successful in its counterterrorism approach in Africa, given that no African group associated with al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State has launched a successful attack on the U.S. homeland.
- **Some tangible U.S. operational success:**
 - » U.S. kinetic CT efforts in Africa since 2001 have had many *operational* successes:
 - » **Clearing territory:** U.S. airstrikes have worked to clear out insurgent-held spaces. For example, U.S. assistance helped dislodge Islamic State affiliates from Sirte, Libya, in 2016. Additionally, numerous strikes against al-Shabaab camps have cleared territory of their presence, at least temporarily.
 - » **Leadership decapitation:** U.S. efforts have led to the targeting and killing of senior group leaders of al-Qa`ida and Islamic State-affiliated groups in Africa. For example, the United States conducted the deadly strike against Ahmed Godane of al-Shabaab in September 2014.
 - » **Slow-down:** U.S. counterterrorism efforts have delayed would-be attacks and group developments. For example, after Godane's death in 2014, al-Shabaab underwent two years of rebuilding, slowing its efforts after being degraded.
- **Successful CT assistance to African states:**
 - » U.S. kinetic CT assistance to partner African states has also led to some successes:
 - » **Counterterrorism units:** U.S. efforts have helped to support successful anti-terrorism units, namely the Danab Brigade in Somalia against al-Shabaab.
 - » **Intelligence assistance:** U.S. efforts have succeeded in offering African partners intelligence about the location and membership of groups associated with al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State.
 - » **Cooperation:** U.S. efforts have encouraged cooperation between actors both *within* African states and *between* African states.
 - » **Advancing U.S. diplomatic presence:** U.S. CT efforts have allowed U.S. embassies new access to higher-level authorities within African partner states.
 - » **Human rights training:** U.S. efforts have succeeded in informing African partner states' approaches to the human rights standards to which their counterterrorism forces should adhere.

Summary of Kinetic Failures

- **Long-term inadequacy:** Despite some short-term, operational successes described above, workshop participants broadly agreed that U.S. kinetic operations in Africa since 2001 have been unsuccessful given that they have not achieved the overarching goal of sustainable, long-term degradation of groups associated with al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. To the contrary, the presence and violence of such groups has grown significantly.
- **Quick wins, long-term challenges:**
 - » U.S. kinetic successes have been temporary, short-lived solutions rather than long-term, sustainable fixes:
 - » **Temporary leadership losses:** Group leader decapitation has resulted in emergence of new leaders.
 - » **Temporary group weaknesses:** U.S. killings have been a "mowing the grass" approach. Grass is cut temporarily, but always grows back.
 - » **No long-term political solution:** U.S. CT efforts' kinetic focus is not matched with a commensurate degree of



political assistance.

- » **Transactional interactions in CT:** U.S. CT efforts with African states and leaders are often transactional and not enduring: Success in CT lies with African states and leaders themselves, the latter whose motivations and outlooks the United States does not seem to be able to alter.
- **Kinetic efforts not backed by non-kinetic efforts:** U.S. kinetic approaches have not been able to succeed because they have not been supported with the arguably more important non-kinetic efforts around governance and economic reform.
- **Worse for the fix?**
 - » Lamentably, U.S. involvement in African counterterrorism since 2001 has arguably exacerbated the problems that it seeks to address:
 - » **Civilian casualties:** Though the United States tries assiduously to avoid them, sometimes U.S. CT operations have led to civilian casualties, thus giving credence to the anti-imperial narratives of African jihadi groups associated with al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State.
 - » **Working with authoritarians:** The United States works with authoritarian regimes in Africa to undertake counterterrorism efforts. Some of these regimes use their positions as U.S. CT allies to prevent critiques of domestic corruption and undemocratic practices.
 - » **Working with human rights abusers:** U.S. CT assistance bolsters the capabilities of some human rights-abusing African militaries.
 - » **Expanding abusive state power:** The standard U.S. solution to mitigate the presence of terrorist groups on the continent has been to empower African states to extend their writ into their states' rural peripheries, exacerbating center-periphery tensions.
 - » **Undermining state authority:** Conversely, U.S. demands that African states not negotiate with jihadi actors have often undermined African state authority and thus legitimacy.
 - » **"Worst of all worlds":** One participant questioned whether the United States had helped to achieve the "worst of all worlds": It has empowered heavy-handed authoritarian African regimes while not providing enough assistance to make a meaningful positive difference in the intended problem set.
- **A misunderstanding of the problem:**
 - » Participants suggested that the United States' fundamental *understanding* of the counterterrorism problem set in Africa is often flawed:
 - » **Politicians, not zealots:** The U.S. approach often fails to see African jihadi actors and groups as simply local politicians and powerbrokers who have succeeded in leveraging discourses of jihad to articulate widespread citizen grievances against abusive African states.
 - » **Jihadi myopia:** The U.S. focus on insurgent groups' connections to al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State can overlook local grievances and why these groups have achieved legitimacy in communities.
- **The wrong approach:**
 - » Certain participants suggested that the United States' fundamental *approach* to the counterterrorism problem set in Africa is flawed:
 - » **Kinetic operations are not tied to non-kinetic operations:** Longer-term solutions like economic reform and governance reform are not prioritized, especially in terms of funding.
 - » **U.S. military, not the whole of government, has the lead role:** The U.S. military is the primary actor, despite its inability to perform longer-term functions asked of it.
 - » **Intelligence failures:** Operations involving U.S. strikes by unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) often fail to adequately gather and exploit intelligence in their aftermaths.
 - » **Strategic communications failures:** The United States cannot control the strategic narrative in most efforts against African jihadi groups.



Panel 2: Assessing Non-Kinetic U.S. Counterterrorism Approaches in Africa, 2001-2021

In the second panel, the keynote and panelist participants were asked to answer the following question:

What is your assessment—delineating both successes and failures—of U.S. non-kinetic approaches (both its own and its assistance to African states) to combat African terror groups since 2001?

Summary of Broader Non-Kinetic Discussion Takeaways

- **A call for a non-kinetic shift:** A theme emerged among participants that when compared to kinetic methods, non-kinetic approaches are better suited to treat the core drivers of radicalization and violence on the continent.
- **A focus on state reform:** A second major theme underscored that participation in groups linked with al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State came from citizen backlash against their own abusive states. State-perpetrated human rights abuses, impunity and lack of accountability among security forces, and perceptions of unfair government treatment of populations are among the main contributors to the radicalization of African populations. Programs from U.S. government agencies such as USAID and the State Department are well positioned to address these dynamics, even if such programs are not explicitly intended to address the drivers of terrorism.
- **Indifferent African partners:** Commitment and buy-in from African partners for U.S. non-kinetic approaches to counterterrorism have historically been lacking. Non-kinetic programs have struggled with implementation and maintenance from African partners. Strong relationships are the backbone of non-kinetic engagement, but the United States cannot force change on unwilling partners. The United States must grapple with how to be more selective in its investments and conditional with its support.
- **Whole-of-government approach:** U.S. efforts to address terrorism in Africa have been too focused on military solutions led by the Department of Defense. U.S. non-kinetic approaches to African terrorist groups include a breadth of activities across the “three Ds”: defense, diplomacy, and development. The United States must balance and integrate the three Ds to create a successful non-kinetic strategy in Africa.
- **Preferable, but not flawless:** Despite their promise over strictly kinetic approaches, non-kinetic approaches are not necessarily a panacea for where kinetic operations have failed.

Summary of Non-Kinetic Successes

- **Institution-building over train and equip:** U.S. counterterrorism assistance in Africa has been most effective when it has gone beyond training and equipping foreign forces, and instead focused on building institutions and security sector oversight.
- **U.S. successes in enduring non-kinetic engagement:** Long-standing regional programs in Africa have provided the United States with opportunities to engage a variety of foreign actors in non-kinetic counterterrorism approaches.
 - » **West Africa:** The Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), specifically USAID’s contributions through its Partnerships for Peace program, has improved coordination in the G5 Sahel, facilitated the passage of national countering violent extremism (CVE) strategies, and improved community-based dialogues.
 - » **East Africa:** The Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) has been a notable success in blending kinetic and non-kinetic approaches to counterterrorism in Africa. The program has built wells and schools, and it has addressed public health issues in regions vulnerable to radicalization. The Partnership for Regional East Africa Counterterrorism (PREACT) has also emulated TSCTP’s work, but in East Africa.
 - » **Beyond the continent:** U.S. engagement in global counterterrorism cooperation such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum has created additional civilian platforms for addressing CT, which is essential for non-kinetic strategy formulation.
- **The United States’ non-CT programs can lead to CT successes:**
 - » U.S. government programs without explicit CT objectives are successfully addressing the political and developmental dynamics that contribute to radicalization and facilitate terrorism in Africa:
 - » **Strengthening justice systems:** USAID and the State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs are strengthening African justice systems. In particular, USAID’s Expanding Access to Justice program has built up civil dispute resolution systems in Somalia. Government impunity for abuses and citizens’ lack of avenues for redress are key drivers of recruitment.



- » **Protecting human rights:** USAID and the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor have made positive advances in strengthening human rights commissions and support mechanisms.
- » **Advancing public health:** USAID's Building Capacity for Integrated Family Planning & Reproductive Health and Population, Environment and Development Action (BUILD) program is working to improve family planning, reproductive health, and development in Africa. Public health support is a common request from African communities, and though not explicitly intended to contribute to CVE efforts, it has the capacity to do so.
- **Some U.S. success in African partner pressure:**
 - » The United States has had some successes in pressuring its African partners to reform their behavior and remain compliant with U.S. expectations for continued non-kinetic assistance:
 - » **Diplomatic pressure:** In 2020, the United States arguably assisted in reducing extrajudicial killings by Burkinabé forces by making repeated public statements warning that U.S. assistance would be jeopardized without a behavior change.
 - » **The United States standing firm:** In Niger, the United States stuck by its withdrawal of support from Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (GATIA), despite contradictory action from the French and Malians. Ultimately, this arguably played a role in pressuring GATIA to limit its use of child soldiers. These measures were successful, and Niger was not relisted under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act.
- **A need to play the long game:** U.S. non-kinetic accomplishments today are laying the groundwork for greater African success tomorrow. Non-kinetic efforts intended for systemic change are generational, thus patience is essential.

Summary of Non-Kinetic Failures

- **A consensus of U.S. non-kinetic inadequacy:** Despite their potential for long-lasting impacts, participants argued that U.S. non-kinetic approaches to counterterrorism in Africa have not reached their full capacity.
- **Wrong tools, wrong partners:**
 - » Many participants argued that the United States is using the wrong tools and supporting the wrong actors on the continent:
 - » **Misunderstanding the primary issues:** U.S. non-kinetic programs in counterterrorism often assume that African states lack *capacity* to fight terror groups and, as such, focus on *capacity-building efforts* aimed at technical solutions. Instead, predatory government actions, not lack of capacity, were noted as some of the main drivers of terrorism and thus the greatest issue areas to change. As such, defense sector reform, rather than technical capacity-building or security assistance, was noted as being a superior choice for desired outcomes.
 - » **Support of autocrats:** U.S. support for autocrats for short-term gains will lead to long-term pain. One participant suggested that current U.S. support for African autocrats is sowing the seeds for a new generation of terrorists in 20 years.
 - » **Supporting national militaries, not local police and justice actors:** The United States' persistent and narrow focus on national military assistance ignores the reality that the most essential security actors in many African countries are actually local police and justice and accountability actors, with whom average citizens have far more frequent interactions.
- **Taking African voices seriously:**
 - » The United States has not sufficiently incorporated African perspectives into its non-kinetic strategy:
 - » **Who is a "terrorist"?** One participant noted that approaching African environments with a Western definition of "terrorism" leads to an inaccurate understanding of local social and political landscapes, and thus risks alienating partners. That participant noted that those that the United States considers to be "jihadis" are simply local politicians.
 - » **Ill-fitting programming:** Several participants noted that U.S. non-kinetic programming is often not consistent with local community needs. For instance, offering CT-focused programs for communities whose greatest articulated need is healthcare resources leaves all parties unsatisfied.



- » “**Great Power**” myopia: The historical tendency for the United States to overlook African needs risks being exacerbated in the current context of near-peer competition. Any U.S. approach that looks at Africa through the lens of how to compete with Russia and China inherently neglects African voices, leading to inefficient and likely counterproductive policy.
- **A U.S. credibility gap:**
 - » The United States has been shown to be inconsistent in its morals and unreliable in its commitments in non-kinetic assistance. These shortcomings create credibility issues that have eroded foreign and domestic confidence in non-kinetic programs:
 - » **Burning bridges:** The rapid U.S. withdrawal from Somalia in 2020 created blowback from Somali partners and community leaders, who began to characterize the United States as an untrustworthy ally.
 - » **Compromised values:** One participant suggested that the United States “mortgages its values” to work with autocratic African governments and has failed to produce tangible returns to justify these policies. The result is a corrosion of the U.S. moral reputation among African states and populations.
 - » **Dependability above all:** Non-kinetic success relies on strong relationships with foreign partners. If the United States makes a promise, it must commit to following through on it.
- **An unclear and uncoordinated U.S. approach to non-kinetic CT efforts:**
 - » A recurring theme was that U.S. policymakers have not been able to articulate a clear and cohesive non-kinetic strategy in Africa. This translates into confusion and inefficiency on the ground:
 - » **The African footnote:** Sub-Saharan Africa is not sufficiently established in national U.S. strategic dialogues. Without a coherent, interagency approach, U.S. policy in Africa is needlessly unstable. This instability is incompatible with the need for long-term, consistent non-kinetic programming.
 - » **Information silos:** The military and civil society sectors are working toward the same goals, but with little to no coordination. U.S. non-kinetic objectives are suffering under a lack of information-sharing at home and abroad. The lack of coordination makes the current non-kinetic environment crowded and chaotic. There is, as one panelist explained, “a lot of movement but no action.”
 - » **Overcrowding:** The U.S. government is so flush with non-kinetic labels and terminology that it is unclear which programs are working and where duplicative efforts can be minimized.

Panel 3: Beyond Counterterrorism

In the third panel, the keynote and panelist participants were asked to answer the following questions:

As we look toward the future, how should the United States think about the relative balance between counterterrorism/security force assistance as compared to other forms of engagement with actors on the continent? What is your assessment—delineating both desirable and undesirable approaches—as to how the United States should think about this balance?

Summary of Beyond CT Discussion Takeaways

- **An imperative moment for a rethink of U.S. Africa policy:** Recent changes in U.S. standing and the global balance of power have catalyzed the need to reformulate the United States’ roles and spheres of influence on the continent broadly.
- **In search of a clear and comprehensive U.S.-Africa strategy:** Current U.S. engagement on the African continent suffers from ill-defined interests and objectives, stove-piping, and a disproportionate focus on technical (rather than holistic) solutions. In the future, the United States needs an integrated, multifaceted, and multidimensional strategy. Emphasis should be placed on promoting democracy, good governance, economic development, and engaging all stakeholders across African society.
- **A call to reform U.S. security assistance:** In the broader process of reforming its Africa strategy, the United States must recalibrate its approach to African security by dramatically reimagining its CT policy. See the following section for suggested avenues to redefine counterterrorism’s role in U.S. engagement.



Summary of Beyond CT Best Practices

- **A U.S. need to take stock of the global environment:**
 - » The United States must recognize the current state of geopolitics in crafting its future engagement in Africa:
 - » **Increasing number of actors:** Powers such as China, Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf States have all been expanding their spheres of influence into Africa, undermining U.S. influence across the continent.
 - » **Declining hold:** The United States has arguably been losing its influence in Africa over the last several administrations, due to U.S. withdrawal from international leadership as well as the rise of other regional powers.
 - » **Competing investments:** China has begun to invest heavily, particularly in natural resources, in Africa.
 - » **Counter misinformation:** To counter the competing narratives of states like China and Russia, the United States must clearly articulate its reasons for engagement and broader objectives on the continent.
 - » **But maintain focus:** The United States must be careful not to exclusively focus on competing with China or Russia in devising a new approach to its Africa strategy, as doing so inhibits effective leveraging of U.S. strengths in its African partnerships.
- **Looking beyond African states as partners:** U.S. engagement in Africa in the future should look toward the multiplicity of relevant actors beyond just partner governments in order to promote common operational and situational awareness.
 - » **Civil society:** Many African countries have seen an increase in popular movements over the past decade, demonstrating the importance of including civil society in U.S. efforts.
 - » **Business associations:** Businesses are often considered distinct from civil society and consequently are not as frequently engaged, despite the influence that they might hold within the state.
 - » **Oscillating between extremes:** The United States must be cautious not to alienate political elites in pursuit of increased cooperation with civil society, as these influential individuals are crucial for enacting substantive programs or change.
- **In search of U.S. African “grand strategy”:**
 - » The United States should look beyond two-year budget cycles or four-year political terms to engage meaningfully in Africa:
 - » **Long-term strategies:** Rather than restricting their vision to what can be accomplished prior to elections, U.S. policymakers should recognize the importance of establishing a longer timeframe for imagining engagement on the continent.
 - » **Personnel changes:** With every new election cycle, the composition of U.S. political leadership can and does change, which can impede the process of policy development and implementation.
 - » **Exploit bipartisanship:** U.S. engagement on the continent is largely a bipartisan issue, so initiatives are more likely to progress regardless of the specific administration in place.
- **Toward a U.S. strategy focused on governance:** Several participants suggested that U.S. involvement in Africa should be multi-pronged, with particular emphasis placed on democracy and good governance.
 - » **Primacy of politics:** U.S. engagement must reflect the understanding that politics frequently drive security dynamics. Therefore, the United States would be wise to promote the development of free, fair, and accountable political systems in partner countries.
 - » **Distance between rulers and people:** Africa is the continent with the largest age gap between rulers and the population, a phenomenon engendered by the youth bulge and the rise of “leaders for life.” Understanding these demographic trends and the challenges and opportunities they present is imperative.
 - » **Trust deficit:** Local populations’ lack of trust in state authorities and institutions represents a fundamental challenge to good governance.
 - » **Easier said than done:** Despite their appeal, the promotion, implementation, and sustainment of democratization efforts are challenging, and the United States currently lacks a clear strategy for assisting with



this evolution.

- **A need for pragmatism:** The United States must be more pragmatic in its approach to engagement on the continent.
 - » **Humility:** The United States should recognize that it cannot singlehandedly transform societies that are vulnerable to violent extremism.
 - » **Engaging with illiberal democracies:** The United States must acknowledge that its African counterparts often are not perfect and thus must be more frank about the trade-offs required in engaging with these partners.
 - » **Select areas with comparative advantage:** The United States should leverage its strengths and select meaningful areas of engagement, such as the health or education sectors.

Summary of Beyond CT Practices to Avoid

- **Recognize the dangers of unsavory CT partners:** The U.S. approach to partnering with undemocratic African regimes for CT purposes has been short-sighted and single-tracked, leaving the United States with few viable alternatives.
 - » **Choice of regimes:** While many autocratic African partners offer short-term stability, these regimes are frequently not likely to remain in power in the long run.
 - » **No window of opportunity:** Once these partner regimes are removed, the United States will no longer possess a foothold in these countries, thus restricting its ability to engage meaningfully in the future.
 - » **Shadow of history:** The United States will be remembered as a pivotal partner to these repressive African governments, which will further undermine U.S. reputation and legitimacy.
- **Managing stability vs. the status quo:** The United States cannot continue to conflate its idea of stability with support for the status quo, regardless of how repressive or fragile this state of affairs might be.
 - » **Dangers of hypocrisy:** The United States has historically supported authoritarian rulers, a trend that contrasts with its professed commitment to democratic principles.
 - » **Resistance to change:** One participant noted that the United States tends to fear social and political change in African societies, rather than viewing it as an arguably healthy outlet for addressing tensions that arise within states.
 - » **Mixed messaging:** The U.S. response to the recent wave of African coups has been inconsistent.
- **A whole-of-society outlook:** U.S. CT policy should not be isolated from political or socioeconomic phenomena.
 - » **Various dimensions of security:** Efforts to improve African partners' security sectors cannot be effectively divorced from their broader political and social contexts.
 - » **Misplaced focus:** U.S. CT approaches compound the tendency to default to tactical or technical solutions, rather than addressing systemic or institutional drivers of insecurity.
 - » **Ignoring economic factors:** Economic development is central to addressing the roots of extremism and radicalization, as many of the rank-and-file members of extremist groups are individuals who are poor and do not possess few viable alternatives.

Conclusion

The preceding three sections have offered overviews of the workshop's discussions on the three foregoing topics.

In broad terms, the workshop's discussions revealed a general assessment that despite its efforts, U.S. counterterrorism assistance in Africa between 2001-2021 has been lackluster at best and harmful at worst. In both the kinetic and non-kinetic realms, the workshop's discussions underscored that U.S. efforts have tended to be most effective at bringing about short-term operational successes but generally not strategically successful in the long-term. Considering these insufficiencies, participants agreed that a rethink of broader U.S. engagement toward the continent is needed. This engagement would see a continued U.S. participation in both kinetic and non-kinetic counterterrorism efforts in Africa, but would see a greater prioritization of democracy, good governance, and economic engagement over a dominating focus on security assistance. To the extent that U.S. counterterrorism assistance in Africa endures, participants



underscored the need for its improvement.

The workshop's discussions brought into stark focus the challenges that the United States has faced in its African counterterrorism efforts between 2001-2021. Beyond what many participants perceived to be a lack of coherence in U.S. policy, objectives, and internal coordination in African counterterrorism engagement, a recurring theme was the numerous challenges that the United States has faced in its on-the-ground engagement. Successive U.S. administrations have resorted to collaborating with non-democratic African regimes, whose buy-in for U.S. counterterrorism programming has often been either minimal or who have used the assistance from the United States for personal or regime-related purposes. When African governments have used U.S. counterterrorism assistance for personal purposes, they have often pushed their citizens toward—not away from—the very groups that such U.S. efforts have sought to combat. Simultaneously, groups associated with al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State can point toward collusion between the United States and repressive African governments to justify their existence and encourage citizen recruitment.

Despite these challenges, the workshop's discussions underscored that the United States has had some successes in the counterterrorism space in Africa between 2001-2021. Kinetically, it has succeeded in degrading the leadership and membership of African jihadi groups, cleared territory and slowed operations of these groups, and encouraged broader cooperation in the African counterterrorism space more generally. Non-kinetically, the United States has worked to improve political, economic, and social conditions in ways that have—directly or indirectly—served to lessen the appeal of al-Qa`ida- and Islamic State-affiliated groups for African populations. The most cited best practice for non-kinetic counterterrorism approaches related to institutional reform in African security and justice sectors.

As the United States looks toward the future, the workshop's participants agreed that a significant rethink of Washington's strategy toward African engagement is needed, not least as regards counterterrorism. In its bid to reduce what was perceived by participants to be a waning influence on the continent with the rise of new international competitors, the United States faces a difficult balancing act of picking the right partners, becoming a trusted and consistent partner, and ensuring, above all, that it can articulate a clear, principled rationale for engaging the continent, including and beyond counterterrorism.

Indeed, in looking toward the future, and in closing this summary, we delineate some of the lingering questions from our panels that were not able to be addressed in-depth:

- What is the ideal operational division of labor between kinetic and non-kinetic efforts in U.S. counterterrorism policy in Africa? How can practitioners design mechanisms to monitor and optimize this division?
- What is the proper balance between reactive and proactive/preventative programs in U.S. counterterrorism assistance in Africa?
- How should the United States select the countries to which it will give both kinetic and non-kinetic support? When should the United States end assistance to countries that are not achieving desired gains, or that are misusing such support?
- Given the professed need of the United States to promote democracy through a recalibration of its engagement with partner regimes, what does “walking away” from African autocrats actually look like, especially when they are important counterterrorism partners?
- How does the United States avoid creating “the worst of both worlds”: that is, empowering African security actors who then undertake heavy-handed approaches against civilians, but who are then also unable or unwilling to use this force against VEOs?
- How can the United States refine its approach to negotiations with VEOs?

We are optimistic that this summary document of CTC's Africa Regional Workshop offers policymakers, scholars, and other international observers some insights about desirable and undesirable practices regarding U.S. approaches to engagement in African counterterrorism and beyond.