

# Intelligence Services in Sub-Saharan Africa

## Making Security Sector Reform Work

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In recent years, the security sector has emerged as a crucial component in guaranteeing lasting peace and security, particularly in countries that arose from bloody civil wars and internal conflicts. Reform of the security sector, therefore, offers a means of ensuring that such countries do not reenter conflicts and wars. In this respect, it is also a part of conflict prevention. Ideally, security sector reform (SSR) addresses the twin challenges posed by security services and security sector governance by transforming military forces to defend their countries against foreign foes and enemies, while at the same time trying to institutionalise civilian oversight and parliamentary control. In order to do so, it aims to strengthen oversight and executive control of all security services, including the army, border control, and intelligence services, while simultaneously attempting to enhance their operational capabilities.

The concept of SSR owes its attractiveness to its twofold function: SSR not only helped identify the missing link between

security policy and development assistance but also, in that sense, led to a turn toward security in the way the West understands and comprehends development and stability. Moreover, SSR provided a coherent concept, the means, to bridge the gap between both fields. Despite this early success, however, SSR has remained largely conceptual; coordination and sequencing of measures taken under the SSR framework remain highly contested issues; governments emerging from conflict situations find it difficult to comprehend the complexity and sophistication of the process; and donors still need to develop a coherent, systemwide approach. Although SSR highlights the importance of well-managed civil-military relations, there seems to be little effort to manage assistance in this realm. Moreover, surprisingly few advances have occurred in understanding these relations in general.<sup>1</sup> The impact of conflicts on civil-military relations has largely been neglected, and the legacy of socialism, particularly in African contexts, has not received much

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scholarly attention; the same holds true of specific challenges posed by the incorporation of intelligence services, customs, and border control. Obviously, during the implementation of SSR by development practitioners, little research supports their efforts. Currently the gap between practice and academic knowledge is widening. It is noteworthy that the books published by Samuel Huntington and Morris Janowitz remain the most influential works in civil-military relations and their role in different forms of statehood.<sup>2</sup> Further scholarly attention will need to focus on civil-military relations, not only to guide efforts in SSR but also to incorporate the history of those relations during the past two to three decades into our understanding of the military in Africa, the Middle East, and those states governed by socialist regimes until the end of the Cold War.

As Andrea Wright put it, when everybody is doing SSR, clearly not everybody knows exactly what to do.<sup>3</sup> Though SSR certainly is en vogue in development circles, indispensable knowledge of the military and security services is thinly spread, especially given the long-standing aversion to the military that has long characterised the development community as a whole. It is therefore feasible to ask whether all donors really have a plan or cohesive framework to guide their efforts. Do they know how to include all national security services? Particularly in the latter case, intelligence services need to be taken into account, but for a variety of reasons, these services have not received the attention they deserve. Against this background, this article focuses on the latter and its role in SSR, aiming to close a gap left both by the lack of academic efforts to describe the role of the intelligence service and by SSR efforts that have largely neglected the intelligence sector. Specifi-

cally, it outlines the role of intelligence services in the national security architecture and their relations with other security services; describes the major problems that SSR needs to address when aiming at cohesive reform of the security sector, including intelligence services; and, finally, draws some conclusions. In doing so, the article concentrates on SSR efforts in sub-Saharan Africa and the particular challenge left by legacies from colonialism and socialism in the African context and the specific impact of the role of the military in African states.

### Defining the Relationship and Identifying Problems

Undoubtedly, security services and governance of the security sector are important features of modern statehood. Representing the heart of any state, security gives nations their legitimacy and their mandate to govern. Ideally, security services provide protection for the population, and the state and its institutions command and control them to that end. In democracies this control would ensure that the military would not undermine the state since the controlling institutions are products of the will of the people. Potentially, however, undemocratic regimes and autocrats could face threats from either outside or inside the country, either from the upper echelons of their own ruling elite or from society itself.<sup>4</sup> Because of this concern for their own survival, many autocrats use security services to further their interests, not those of the state. Especially during the Cold War, national security services in sub-Saharan Africa occupied themselves with regime security, often receiving aid from their Cold War allies for this purpose. This practice has included intelligence services as well. Ideally, in autocracies

the security of the regime translates directly into regime stability.<sup>5</sup> This, however, by no means equates to the stability and security of the state, let alone its population. Quite the contrary, the means employed to secure regime stability have often undermined the soundness of state structures. Efforts to enhance regime stability, therefore, often-times only foster the negative sovereignty of these states, increasing their status as quasi-states—nations referred to as states only because of the international recognition they received earlier.<sup>6</sup>

A majority of African states has at some point tried to develop socialist systems, whether they called it scientific socialism or African socialism. Between the beginning of the decolonisation period and the 1980s, no fewer than 35 of 53 states called themselves socialist at various times.<sup>7</sup> These experiences have left a problematic legacy since socialist regimes tend to highlight regime security even more than other autocracies, often by putting the party and not the state in charge of national security affairs and the army. Communist countries simply would not tolerate anything like a military outside the political realm, since in previous decades they considered it the armed wing of capitalism and the defender of the bourgeoisie. In the eyes of communist leaders, therefore, it was totally legitimate to turn the military into an instrument of the Communist Party, a tool to modernise society and advance socialism. As the case of Ethiopia dramatically illustrates, this dynamic led to a militarisation of society and a politicisation of the military, intelligence, and other security services.<sup>8</sup> Over decades, such a focus on regime security manifested itself in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa in decision-making processes, largely undisturbed by any civilian oversight and control at all. This situation inevitably culminated in ram-

nant corruption and poor management of the national security forces. Corruption, poor ministerial planning, and the lack of oversight have left many of sub-Saharan Africa's armies and intelligence services ill prepared for current challenges, from an increase in the trade of narcotics in Western Africa to the threat of radical Islamism in the Horn of Africa.

This legacy has weakened armies and intelligence services alike, not least because these two institutions share important features. Both exist to protect the state, but both command the power to become its greatest threat. SSR in both areas identifies the need to strengthen civil oversight bodies but at the same time to face the challenge of increasing operational effectiveness. Both have to cope with the legacies of the Cold War. For example, like many military forces in sub-Saharan Africa, intelligence services in autocracies have been and frequently are still dominated by the ethnic group that seized power in the nation, however small that group. Although intelligence services in sub-Saharan Africa originally mirrored their colonial counterparts, they often underwent transformation after these countries gained independence. In Anglophone African states, for instance, most intelligence services originated from within the police, most commonly in the form of the special branch. However, since many countries in sub-Saharan Africa have faced recurrent coups d'état by military forces or presidential guards, the shape and function of these services have often changed rather dramatically.<sup>9</sup> In the wake of such coups, newly established regimes quickly moved to redirect the work of intelligence services to their own safety and often subsumed intelligence command structures under military leadership, creating a highly politicised and militarised intelligence community that

worked solely toward regime security.<sup>10</sup> Often enough, new regimes and juntas created new or rival intelligence services with the sole purpose of maintaining regime security. These security services arose only after a certain force had seized the state and subsequently developed an interest in the consolidation of power. The Gambia is one such case in point.

In 1994, when the army under the leadership of a young officer named Yahya Jammeh staged a coup d'état, it initially had only a tenuous hold on power. The new regime quickly moved to install the Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council, which would lead the Gambia for the next two years, before Jammeh would run on a civilian platform for reelection.<sup>11</sup> Regime security, however, remained an important issue during these years, and in 1995 the new regime created the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), which reinforced the ruling council's control over society and radically changed the political atmosphere in the country.<sup>12</sup> Despite the establishment of the civilian platform in 1996—the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction—the country remains a dictatorship, and the NIA has as its top priority the maintenance of regime security. In fact, like other parts of the national security apparatus, the agency identifies dissidents and journalists critical of the regime. Moreover, it may have played a role in fabricating alleged coups from 1996, 1997, and 2006, all of which served as a pretext for the regime to consolidate its hold on power by jailing its dissidents. SSR in the area of intelligence services, therefore, should not only change the ways of conducting intelligence but also alter its ends significantly.

Unsurprisingly, these services have historically been comparatively weak, particularly in terms of countering threats from abroad. During the Cold War, the stronger

intelligence from Western nations or the Soviet Union and its allies by no means compensated for this weakness. In the Congo crisis of the 1960s, for example, the United States relied heavily on Belgian intelligence because it had long neglected to develop its own capabilities in sub-Saharan Africa, believing until the 1960s that the former colonial powers would take the lead in cooperating with the newly independent African states and keeping the Soviet Union out of sub-Saharan Africa. When it finally did establish an intelligence apparatus, it still had problems capturing the entire picture.<sup>13</sup> The end of the Cold War again saw intelligence capabilities with regard to sub-Saharan Africa significantly downgraded, and the West is only slowly rebuilding that capacity. One, therefore, has reason to believe that in the absence of both reliable intelligence on Africa and strong partnerships with African partner services, the West currently might not be in a position to strengthen the operational capabilities of African intelligence services.

But intelligence services differ in one important respect from armies. By their very nature, they are active services—more so than their army counterparts during peacetime. Apart from that, the work of intelligence officials requires a certain distance from politicians and political decision makers for various reasons. On the one hand, they must work partly under covert circumstances, which requires a certain isolation. On the other hand, because political decision makers are not subject to the same scrutiny as intelligence officials, close relationships run the risk of compromising the covert nature of intelligence work. A challenge to civil oversight, this distance renders SSR efforts particularly difficult. Ideally, intelligence services operate under the leadership of some sort of executive au-

thority that, in turn, must report to independent legislative bodies of the state (in democracies, most often a parliamentary oversight committee). In these settings, intelligence services must regularly account for their activities, and the oversight committee must have the power to demand any information it sees fit to implement its oversight function, including the right to issue subpoenas. However, even in fully established democracies, this arrangement is by no means always certain, and security establishments can still exert influence on politics. As Nicole Ball asked in the 1980s, just how much influence is “normal”?<sup>14</sup> Oftentimes one can detect problems with oversight and the implementation of civilian superiority only indirectly—in sub-Saharan Africa, perhaps the most apparent being the extent of control over and public accountability for the financing of intelligence services. Since intelligence services by necessity operate in secretive ways, civilian oversight is harder to implement than in other areas of the security sector, indicating the twin challenges that intelligence presents to SSR. That is, on the one hand, the necessity for efficient intelligence has particular relevance in countries that can apply only limited financial resources (as many times is the case in countries undertaking SSR) and therefore require the use of secret measures. On the other hand, this scenario makes effective civilian oversight all the more important.

Lastly, in implementing counterterrorism measures, intelligence services need to act simultaneously in a deterritorialized, desegregated, and cohesive manner. At the same time, the number of institutional security services has grown on nearly all levels, whether national, federal, or regional. The growing number

of agencies as well as the need to cooperate and at times move beyond the boundary of operational culture therefore constitutes a particularly daunting challenge to the services. But even if they manage these relations rather efficiently, democratic oversight bodies face the task of controlling activities that are becoming ever more complex and sophisticated. The number of agencies and interagency relationships requires efficient oversight bodies. However, these bodies cannot expand in the same way intelligence agencies can, nor can they monitor all interagency communications and linkages, whether within the country or between foreign agencies. Usually based as parliamentary committees, oversight bodies cannot increase in number and cannot have more parliamentarians or staffers allocated to them. Moreover, an expanding system of intelligence and security sectors may require experienced parliamentarians in the oversight committees, but in democracies one always sees some fresh faces in committees. In sub-Saharan Africa, where many democracies have been established only recently, following either the end of the Cold War or civil wars, experienced parliamentarians willing to apply and capable of applying the full spectrum of oversight are in short supply. On top of all that, one must consider the institutional history: some agencies may have come under close scrutiny, perhaps following a need felt in parliament to do so or in the wake of some sort of scandal. Such strict monitoring might not apply to different and recently established agencies, even though they engage in the same activities, simply because of their newness and because politicians have not yet felt the need to establish the same sort of scrutiny.

## Conclusions

Intelligence services are perhaps the least studied instrument of the state's security apparatus in sub-Saharan Africa. SSR in the area of intelligence services ultimately aims to detach those services from political abuse and at the same time strengthen executive and legislative control over them. The challenge, therefore, really lies in overcoming historically grown civil-intelligence relations that focused on regime security and replacing them with relations characterised by stronger ties between oversight committees and intelligence leadership, at the same time ensuring that the services focus on state rather than regime security. Typically, any intelligence service recommends bolstering operational capabilities and putting more analysts in the field.<sup>15</sup> However, for the foreseeable future, many sub-Saharan African countries cannot commit more resources to intelligence, particularly when the recipient states themselves will hold ownership in the aid process. Therefore, clear and specific legislation detailing mandates and fields of operations is as important as the adherence to general principles of civilian control. Moreover, despite scarce resources, security services should be financed by the state only and should have no access to any other monetary sources. Parliaments will need to extend control from oversight of the forces to allocation, weapons procurement, and definition of the rules of intelligence engagement—a challenging task. For outside powers, it is hard to offer help in establishing oversight over intelligence agencies.

Improving capabilities, an important issue in the sub-Saharan Africa context, also represents a question of national security to the Western world. Ever since radical Islamists began challenging the

state in northern Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, and Somalia, partner agencies have needed capabilities in preemptive intelligence and counterintelligence. States should avoid situations such as the one in Pakistan, where Inter-Services Intelligence is reluctant to cut ties it has nurtured with the Taliban and fight them although they have clearly begun to pose a threat to the state. Strong capabilities of partner services in Nigeria and Eastern Africa are therefore in the best interests of the West.<sup>16</sup> As the Gambian case illustrates, some services exist for the sole purpose of enhancing regime security; consequently, reforming their structures and capabilities will pose a particularly difficult challenge. In such cases, SSR needs to change the way of anticipating threats.

Further research also needs to examine more closely the differences in structure, style, and methods between Western and sub-Saharan African intelligence services. Nearly all developing countries are reforming their security sectors and intelligence services anyway; in recent years, the donor agenda simply overruled these efforts. In this context, sequencing becomes first and foremost a question of where to pick up local reform efforts. Additionally, the fact that most donors still develop their own approaches to SSR catalyses the neglect of SSR efforts in recipient countries and often leads to contradicting donor agendas—creating a specific burden. Moreover, since SSR programmes are relatively new and, in most cases, still in the initial stage of the implementation process, the withdrawal of donors adds a relatively recent challenge that also lends more importance to the question of sustainability. Overall, reform efforts have neglected intelligence and failed to place sufficient emphasis on the training of parliamentarians; moreover, knowledge of intelligence services in sub-Saharan Africa is too thinly spread. As SSR

in sub-Saharan Africa turns into a policy priority of the West and its development assistance, a need exists for more research

into oversight enforcement in Africa and the characteristics of African intelligence services. □

## Notes

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2. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957); and Morris Janowitz, *Military Institutions and Coercion in the Developing Nations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

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5. Ulrich Schneckener, "States at Risk: Zur Analyse fragiler Staatlichkeit," in *Fragile Staatlichkeit: "States at Risk" zwischen Stabilität und Scheitern*, ed. Ulrich Schneckener (Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos, 2009), 21. For the ideological character of security forces during the Cold War, see John Markakis and Michael Waller, "The Hammer, the Sickle and the Gun," in *Military Marxist Regimes in Africa*, ed. John Markakis and Michael Waller (London: Frank Cass, 1986), 1–13.

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7. M. Anne Pitcher and Kelly M. Askew, "African Socialisms and Postsocialisms," *Africa* 76, no. 1 (2006): 1–14, [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/africa\\_the\\_journal\\_of\\_the\\_international\\_african\\_institute/v076/76.1pitcher01.pdf](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/africa_the_journal_of_the_international_african_institute/v076/76.1pitcher01.pdf).

8. Bahru Zewde, "The Military and Militarism in Africa: The Case of Ethiopia," in *The Military and Milita-*

*rism in Africa*, ed. Eboe Hutchful and Abdoulaye Bathily (Dakar, Senegal: Codesria, 1998), 258–63.

9. For research on coups d'état in Africa, see Aaron Belkin and Evan Schofer, "Toward a Structural Understanding of Coup Risk," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 47, no. 5 (2003): 594–620, <http://jcr.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/47/5/594.pdf>; Patrick J. McGowan, "Coups and Conflict in West Africa, 1955–2004: Part I: Theoretical Perspectives," *Armed Forces and Society* 32, no. 1 (2005): 5–23, <http://spafs.highwire.org/cgi/reprint/32/1/5.pdf>; and Patrick J. McGowan, "African Military Coups d'état, 1956–2001: Frequency, Trends and Distribution," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, no. 3 (2003): 339–70.

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16. David Omand, "The Limits of Avowal: Secret Intelligence in an Age of Public Scrutiny," in *National Intelligence Systems: Current Research and Future Prospects*, ed. Gregory F. Treverton and Wilhelm Agrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 235–64.

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