

REFLECTIONS

The Role of Religion in Military Strategy and Security Cooperation in Africa

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The intersection of faith and security is a profound and often underappreciated aspect of military operations. As leaders, strategists, and chaplains, we have a duty to acknowledge and integrate the religious dimensions of conflict, stability, and security. The Africa Command (AFRICOM) is honored to support this critical discussion at the International Military Chiefs of Chaplains Conference (IMCCC) African Chaplains Forum. Our command operates with limited resources, but by fostering partnerships, we enhance our collective understanding and effectiveness.

Religion as a Foundational Element in African Security

Religious identity plays a pivotal role in shaping the priorities of African societies. In many cases, allegiance to faith and tribe supersedes national identity. This has significant implications for security strategy, governance, and humanitarian efforts. The continent is home to some of the world's largest Christian and Muslim communities, with Islam being the fastest-

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Maj. Gen. Ekman received his commission in 1991 after graduating from the U.S. Air Force Academy. He has primarily flown sailplanes, the F-16 Fighting Falcon and the F-22 Raptor, and has commanded at the squadron, wing and Air Expeditionary Task Force levels. His staff assignments include service at U.S. Air Forces Central Command, Office of the Secretary of Defense, North American Aerospace Defense and U.S. Northern Commands and Office of the Defense Representative Pakistan. Prior to his current position, the general served as Director, Strategy, Engagement, and Programs, U.S. Africa Command.

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¹ This speech has been lightly edited for print publication.

growing religion globally. Over 100 million Africans adhere to traditional faiths, which often interact with Christianity and Islam. Faith is not just a private belief system, it is a lens through which people view their priorities, choices, and needs.

Any people-centric approach to security in Africa must account for this religious context. In many nations, faith identity supersedes national identity and exists alongside family and tribal affiliations. If we fail to recognize this reality, we risk overlooking a crucial factor that influences stability, conflict, and cooperation. Therefore, understanding the relationship between religious leaders and governments is essential. Many security and development initiatives fail because they do not adequately consider religious dynamics. Military chaplains have a unique opportunity to advise policymakers on how faith influences conflict zones, displaced populations, and post-war recovery efforts. A truly people-centric approach to security must also be religion-centric.

The Role of Military Chaplains in Supporting the Force

Military chaplains are entrusted with the spiritual well-being of service members and their families. Their mission extends beyond mere religious support. It directly impacts the moral resilience and operational effectiveness of our forces. Key responsibilities of military chaplains include providing religious ministry and ensuring the free exercise of religion within the military, strengthening the moral and ethical decision-making of soldiers, particularly in combat scenarios, promoting human rights and preventing civilian harm, and offering restorative and redemptive care, addressing issues like PTSD, substance abuse, and suicide. Chaplains play a vital role in maintaining the overall health of the force, both physically and spiritually. By building religious strength, they equip service members to make better moral choices, ultimately leading to more disciplined and effective military operations.

Religious Advisement: Understanding the Enemy

Religious beliefs also shape the motivations and behaviors of adversaries. As Sun Tzu wisely stated, “Know thy enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles, you will never be defeated.” Understanding the ideological underpinnings of extremist movements is critical in countering them.

For example, Salafism, an extremist interpretation of Islam, has fueled violent groups that manipulate religious doctrine for political ends. Similarly, groups like the Anti-Balaka militias in the Central African Republic and the Lord’s Resistance Army, which operates in central and east Africa, have distorted religious identities to justify violence. By comprehending the religious motivations of such groups, we improve our ability to prevent radicalization and, when necessary, to defeat them in battle.

Moreover, religious advisement is not solely about countering threats it is also about preventing them. Addressing the religious needs of marginalized communities can mitigate grievances before they escalate into conflict. Encouraging religious moderation and interfaith dialogue can be a powerful tool for peace building.

Integrating Religious Considerations into Military Strategy

At USAFRICOM, our mission is to support U.S. national security objectives while strengthening African partnerships. Our strategic goals include:

1. Presence and partnership: building enduring relationships with African allies.
2. Countering threats: addressing violent extremism and other security challenges.
3. Responding to crises: providing rapid assistance during conflicts and disasters.
4. Bolstering allies and partners: enhancing the capabilities of African militaries.
5. Supporting whole-of-government efforts: coordinating security with diplomatic and development initiatives.

To achieve these goals, religious factors must be considered at every stage of planning and execution. Religion is predictive (helping us anticipate threats), propelling (driving movements and conflicts), and post facto (playing a role in resolution and reconciliation). Military chaplains must play an active role in shaping strategies that account for these dimensions.

The Role of Partnership in Military Chaplaincy

USAFRICOM is fundamentally a security cooperation command. Our strength lies in our ability to build partner capacities and support African-led initiatives. Military chaplaincy is an integral part of this cooperation. Over the past year, we have engaged in several activities to strengthen this partnership, including knowledge exchanges with African military chaplaincies, proposals to establish three regional military chaplain centers of excellence, participation in joint military exercises, visits to the U.S. Army Institute for Religious Leadership, and National Guard partnerships supporting over 20 African nations. These efforts are designed to enhance the role of military chaplains across Africa, ensuring they have the resources, training, and institutional support necessary to fulfill their mission.

Conclusion: A Call to Reflection and Action

Ultimately, our mission transcends military strategy. While AFRICOM operates within the framework of national security, we, as people of faith, are part of a much greater campaign, a campaign for peace, harmony, and human dignity. May we all find the persistence and strength to carry out this mission with wisdom and compassion.

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