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States must invest in drone research and development to tackle insecurity in the Sahel

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The global race to acquire drone technology has intensified among state and non-state actors seeking to assert control over territories. In the Sahel, the use of drones by militarised terrorist groups requires a government response. Ezenwa Olumba argues that African states should invest in the research and development of drones to counter the threat defensively, rather than rely on external suppliers.

An **Associated Press** report in 2018 that Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) had begun using drones to establish caliphates, the first incidents in Africa by a non-state actor, came as no surprise to some. Many researchers and commentators have been aware of the **enormous financial sums generated** by these extremists through kidnappings and extortions to afford such technology. Nonetheless, observers, including Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari, signalled their

surprise. The report came barely two years after the Nigerian military was **reported** to have used armed drones to conduct strikes against Boko Haram targets in 2016.

Since the report, **the Libyan Liberation Army**, an opposition group to the official government, has been documented as using drone technology. On 30 September 2019, the Somali militant group Al-Shabaab was **reported** to have used drone attacks in Somalia as part of their campaign against a military base used by the US army. ISIS-linked jihadist groups in northern Mozambique used drones in early 2022 to **target and kill** Mozambican soldiers.

Until recently, drones were used exclusively by state actors in Africa. The US has used drones to **target al-Qaida and Islamic State members** and members of **Al-Shabaab**. Other non-state actors deploy drones to support their various military and strategic campaigns. France has employed American-made **Reaper drones** to combat Islamist insurgents in northern Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

Recent reports regarding the use of drones and their sophistication are concerning. The downing of three ISIS drones by the Mozambique Army in March 2022 using an Israeli counter-drone system, which jammed the drones mid-flight, **revealed** a concerning trend: non-state actors are deploying small, fast and low-flying drones difficult to detect with a conventional radar system. A **New York Times** article in September 2019 revealing that Boko Haram possesses drone technology superior to the Nigerian military corroborates the story. These drones **have been described** as used in different ways: to conduct armed strikes at locations of enemy subjects; for tactical support to ground forces conducting offensive and defensive missions; for targeted VIP assassinations; and for automated assassinations when drones spot a target at random.

State responses of research and development

Turkey is a prime example of effective state-backed investment into drone technology. The Turkish-made **Bayraktar TB2** drone model was **reportedly**

instrumental in turning the tide of the Libyan civil war in 2019, supporting the Tripoli-based government against Khalifa Haftar and his opposition group. In another battleground in 2021, the Turkish-backed Azerbaijani military retook control of the Nagorno-Karabakh region from Russian-backed Armenian troops after only six weeks of fighting. Turkey has been selling drones to Ukraine since at least 2021, and reports into how the TB2 models have assisted in halting the advance of Russian troops in Ukraine will soon emerge.

Baykar Tech, which manufactures the TB2 armed drones, is owned by a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Selçuk Bayraktar, who won a government-sponsored national drone competition in 2006 (who in 2016 **married** the daughter of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan). Bayraktar is now recognised as revolutionising the Turkish drone industry, with the TB2 **argued** to have the potential to alter the face of warfare, due to its relatively cheap production, similar to the Soviet Kalashnikov AK-47 rifle in twentieth century conflict.

But like the prohibition of AK47s, any attempts by governments to ban the possession and use of drones by non-state actors will fail. And neither should governments think that the latest technology will give them an uncontested upper hand against insurgents. While drones have been successfully used in Yemen and Pakistan, their use in Somalia, for instance, has **not produced comparable results**. The Sahel's uniqueness in its type of terrorist activity and physical terrain may also make comparisons to other regions tricky.

Governments should instead support efforts at research and development of drone technologies, tailored to its region, particularly those that can jam armed drones in mid-flight. This approach will involve tapping into the talent of upcoming amateur drone enthusiasts and providing them with access to global drone education, then employing them in departments at home to deal with domestic threats. Indeed, talent in the drone technology industry exists in many countries in the Sahel region, which governments must harness before expertise migrates to Europe, the US or even to join

insurgents. **For example**, Ignatius Asabor, a 22-year-old Nigerian, was recently hired by the Finnish company Radai to expand their drone-building technical team. Such cases of human capital flight will become increasingly common. The young man stated that he would never return to Nigeria.

If governments follow the “Turkish Model”, they will decrease their reliance on pre-made drone technology products with influence limited to what they can afford. And there is an urgency: insurgent groups could soon learn how to evade jamming technologies effectively.

With rapid advances recorded within the drone industry, African countries affected by conflict are still in the early stages of drone technology development. Non-state actors such as Boko-Haram and Al-Shabaab could soon begin deploying autonomous drones capable of delivering cluster bombs targeting people or infrastructure and evading jamming equipment. Now is the time to rethink approaches to protecting the future of the region.

Photo: The Paratroopers Brigade concluded an extensive week-long exercise in cooperation with the Armored Corps. Credit: Israel Defense Forces. Licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

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