No refuge: 
The crisis of refugee militarization in Africa 
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The state of Africa: 
A history of fifty years of independence 
Martin Meredith
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In the last two decades, there has been an unprecedented proliferation of political turmoil and armed conflicts – both internal and international – on the African continent. Invariably, these situations have generated hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), with far-reaching effects on states and entire regions. For a start, the influx of refugees has placed heavy economic burdens on receiving states and destabilised fragile socio-economic arrangements. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, the changing dynamics in refugee and IDP camps – in particular the movement and use of small arms – has had and continues to have far-reaching effects on the security of states and the region at large.

Although serious academic interest in the militarisation of refugee and IDP camps is relatively recent, the militarisation of refugees on the continent has a long history. It can

be traced back to the colonial period when refugees were routinely involved in liberation wars around the continent and often played a crucial role in them. In recent times, this phenomenon has been largely associated with those parts of the continent that have witnessed political turmoil and armed conflict. The Horn of Africa, the greater Eastern and Central African region and West Africa serve as examples.

While there is no agreement on the meaning of the militarisation of refugees, surveys have shown that refugee militarisation may take various forms: direct participation, or support by refugees of insurgencies; refugees being used as proxies by host states or rebel groups to pursue political or geo-strategic goals against neighbouring states; the presence and abuse of firearms and the use of camps for firearm trafficking; the use of refugee resources to support armed conflict (voluntary and/or coercive); military training of refugees; and attacks on refugee camps and settlements.

As these cases studies have shown, the non-civilian attributes of refugee and IDP camps may be varied, sometimes extending to seemingly non-violent activities. The militarisation of such camps in whatever form, particularly when refugees engage directly in armed conflict, raises serious questions of security not only for the host state, but also for the region. In addition, militarisation threatens to undermine the existing international regime of refugee and IDP protection. Naturally, the phenomenon has posed niggling questions for a range of institutions, notably the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian agencies.

As noted above, although the militarisation of refugees and IDPs has a long history, concern has recently been heightened by the facility with which small arms can be accessed in various conflict zones and refugee-hosting states which may be equally engulfed in armed conflict. Aside from the refugee militarisation issue, many players concerned or involved in efforts to address small arms proliferation (for example the United Nations, various other international organisations such as Oxfam International, the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) and Amnesty International, as well as domestic groups) recognise, as noted by Kofi Annan, that small arms proliferation is not only a security issue, but also one that implicates human rights and development. Yet in current discourse, the linkage between refugee militarisation and small arms is only beginning to be acknowledged.

In a serious attempt to engage with these issues, *No refuge: the crisis of refugee militarization in Africa*, edited by Robert Muggah and Edward Mogire, considers the the militarisation of refugees and IDPs in camps in four African countries – Guinea, Uganda, Tanzania and Rwanda. It is a timely venture indeed. Formulated in consultation with various international relief and humanitarian agencies, diplomats and practitioners, the study investigates and seeks answers to five core questions:

- What is, and has been, the nature and extent of refugee and IDP camp militarisation?
What are the preconditions for refugee and IDP camp militarisation?

What are, and have been, the scale and distribution of arms availability in refugee camps?

What are, and have been, the impacts of militarisation on the security of refugees and host communities?

What are the responses of the UNHCR, host states and the region to refugee and IDP militarisation?

The book comprises six well-researched chapters. The first introduces the core issues and concepts and sets out the framework and methodology adopted in the study. The next four chapters discuss the country case studies – Guinea, Uganda, Tanzania and Rwanda, in that order. The last chapter provides an overview of findings, thus comparatively reflecting on refugee and IDP militarisation in Africa. This exercise is informed largely by the findings of the four case studies and by the burgeoning body of literature on refugee situations and disarmament.

Each case study discusses the array of practical case-specific interventions undertaken by the UNHCR to deal with the potential or actual militarisation of camps, starting with post-genocide Rwanda. In breaking with existing studies which do not always sufficiently discuss the linkages between refugee militarisation and small arms proliferation, as well as the politics associated with it, the book recognises the centrality of small arms politics to a comprehensive view of and measures to be taken in response to the militarisation of refugee and IDP camps. The book explores, with respect to all the countries studied, reasons why refugees arm themselves and focuses on the challenges encountered by the relevant agencies (in particular the UNHCR) in dealing with the problem together with host countries. The case studies reveal shared problems such as disruptive regional politics, lack of political will and corruption, as well as country-specific challenges that require targeted responses, some of which have already been instituted. The case of Guinea is perhaps the best example of creative targeted responses by the UNHCR.

The strength of this book lies in a number of aspects. First, its empirical treatment of the case studies and the comparative approach to the discussion set it apart from other works and perhaps constitute its greatest contribution. Second, while the case studies are merely representative – they are based on regional and other select criteria – they proffer new evidence on existing issues that should enable stakeholders to revisit the issues and pose new questions relating to most of the dynamics of refugee and IDP militarisation. Third, the study should go a long way in raising the profile of small arms control on the refugee agenda, being the editors’ overall objective. Fourth, the book centrally situates refugee militarisation between, on the one hand, the realist international relations
approach, which emphasises traditional security threats between states, and on the other hand, the humanitarian school, which views refugees as the harmless victims of conflict. Finally, the appended research protocol, which sets out methodologies and other relevant particulars, is a useful resource for those interested in similar or further research.

Because of its able and excellent treatment of a web of contemporary refugee militarisation and security issues in contemporary situations, the book should be a resourceful read for donors, policymakers, practitioners and academics concerned with strengthening and ameliorating refugee protection.

Godfrey Mukhaya Musila
The state of Africa: A history of fifty years of independence*

Martin Meredith

Attempting to document the political history of the African continent over the last fifty years is a daunting task demanding multidisciplinary skills as well as an intimate knowledge of seemingly unconnected occurrences in the different regions.

Geographically the African continent has 53 states with contiguous borders – however, politically each state is unique. Reflecting the history of the continent is the challenge that Meredith attempts to address in the 688 pages of The state of Africa: a history of fifty years of independence. The approach adopted follows the genre established by international institutions that have sought to put the blame for the lack of peace and development in Africa almost exclusively on the shoulders of its leaders. Not surprisingly, one of the reviews in the Washington Wall Street Journal was quick to assert that 'Meredith’s book so convincingly shows [that it] is bad leadership, first and foremost, that has held the continent back'.

In this debate, without detracting from the misdemeanours of African leaders, attention to other factors is deliberately downplayed. In so doing, the equal blame that should be laid at the door of Western capitals is largely ignored. Africa remains an interesting place in terms of tracing its political history over the last fifty years through the behaviour of its leaders; however, the negative influence of neo-colonial machinations working through unelected African leaders has been minimised. In practice, however, the latter combination has left African populations at the mercy of Western capital, as evidenced in the selected case studies by the reign of such unelected leaders as Mobutu Sese Seko, Jean Bedel Bokassa, Gnassingbe Eyadema, Hissein Habre, Houphouet-Boigny, Omar Bongo, and Juvenal Habyarimana – to name but a few. Stated differently, the actions of some of these dictators was to serve and implement foreign policy interests, generally managed by Western intelligence organisations, whilst each of the leaders lined their own pockets. Fortunately, the importance of this factor and its influence is alluded to in the book, albeit without full acknowledgement. Secondly, Africa’s decolonisation in the 1960s was subjected to a stifling Cold War influence until the early 1990s. To this end, the political history of Egypt, Libya, Ethiopia, Somalia, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa became subjected to the dynamics of the Cold War era. Finally, the African continent remains at the mercy of global and unequal terms of trade. In the stilted arrangement, Africa has been relegated to providing primary products whose prices have been in serious decline. Together with failing African political leadership over the last fifty years, the continent has had its natural growth, political maturity and economic development effectively stunted.

The book is arranged in various parts comprising the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. There are 35 short chapters, most averaging 5–6 pages, but with very useful chapter notes. The themes identified fall into epochs, which for purposes of brevity include: pre-colonial – up to the late 1950s; the one-party state era; military coups; and neo-colonialism and the Cold War. These imperially connected phases arrested the development of nationalism and Arab political development.

Assessing the current transitions, Samuel Huntington has called the new era the ‘Third wave of democratisation’. In this period, since the 1990s, more than 30 ‘democratic elections’ were held on the continent. The result of these ‘elections’ has, however, been disastrous as a result of the fragility of political systems and absence of the pillars of a ‘liberal democratic society.’ Instead of ushering in peace and tranquillity, the political terrain now demonstrates increased ethnic strife, and collapsed or weak states such as Angola, Mozambique, Sudan, Chad, Rwanda, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Côte d’Ivoire.

In writing the book, Meredith benefited from his intimate knowledge of Africa’s political affairs and its leaders. Also, he has an extensive publication record on the continent, including The first dance of freedom: black Africa in the postwar era (1984). This now stands
as his most important preparatory and interpretive work. Meredith makes important contributions to our knowledge by keeping track of the genesis of political orientation, participation and end of empire periods in the life of African presidents, some of whose contributions have become idolised and shrouded in myth. There are legends such as Kwame Nkrumah, and through the careful citations of long-time secretary Erica Powell (Powell 1984), we discover that the former had been invited, nay employed, as a full-time organising secretary by Dr Joseph Danquah of the United Gold Coast Convention and after machinations, ended up jailing his former boss. Furthermore, once in power, Nkrumah amassed a staggering wealth put at £2 322 million pounds from state coffers (Meredith 2006:695). Nkrumah’s sex life was also controversial, and he ended up with a ‘delivered’ Egyptian wife whom he met the day before the wedding (Meredith 2006:23–29). Furthermore, after he was deposed from power by a military coup in 1966, Nkrumah decided to send his family back to Egypt, managing to distance his offspring from Ghanaian affairs even after his death in exile. Meredith reflects on Nkrumah’s burning desire when, after attending endless cabinet and Ghanaian government affairs engagements, he confided in Erica Powell that ‘what he missed out most was to devout attention to his vision of bringing about African unity and for which he was prepared to resign the presidency’ (Meredith 2006:191). Viewed in this context, Nkrumah’s legacy, despite the flaws, has continued to hold high in the Pan-African community.

Meanwhile, in the Congo, Mobutu Sese Seko, the former sergeant recruited by Patrice Lumumba, turns against his boss, jails him, and participates in his assassination before openly working as a spy for the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as well as Belgium (Meredith 2006:689-706). After thirty years in power, with the assistance of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, Mobutu had amassed assets of well over US$5 billion. This dual role was to continue throughout his reign, confirming the point we made earlier that Africa peoples have experienced hardships at the mercy of unelected leaders who were in the pocket of Western governments.

Mobutu’s role is also true of the roles played by the former French Army sergeant Jean Bedel Bokassa of the Central African Republic and Côte d’Ivoire’s Houphouet-Boigny. Both were protégés, extravagant in their tastes, including the monstrous Bokassa winged coronation chair, costing some US$22 million (Meredith 2006:59–71). France, as an imperial and neo-colonial power, kept unelected presidents in office but was also quick to participate in their removal when they had become liabilities. While focusing on this dual role of presidents, we however accept the fact that some African presidents acted independently. These include General Sani Abacha of Nigeria and the millions which he stole from state coffers before dying in office.

Meredith also provides an excellent account of Ethiopia’s ‘Elect of God’ Haile Selassie, who was later deposed by military strongman Mengistu Mariam. Finally, Meredith reviews the genocidal events in Burundi and Rwanda. He also provides useful
perspectives on Somalia and its complex clan system. In the discussion, Meredith traces the foundations of Arab nationalism in North Africa leading to the exclusion of this zone from being subject to the ‘Third wave of democratisation’ as we have witnessed elsewhere, at the behest of the dominant West. In his discussion of North-Arab Africa, Martin presents a comprehensive and succinct outline that explains today’s continuing strife in that Arab-African region.

Despite the accolades, the text has its limitations. First, the political history of presidents has been limited to where it almost exclusively intersects with conflict; second, it does not examine the events in the former Portuguese East Africa, now Mozambique; third, it sketchily examines the Kenyan Mau-Mau struggle, given what we now know through Caroline Elkins’ Britain’s Gulag: the brutal end of empire in Kenya (Pimlico, London, 2005); and fourth, little is said of the struggle for independence in South West Africa (now Namibia) by the South West African People’s Organisation (SWAPO). Despite these shortcomings, this book is recommended for those seeking to expand their understanding of political developments on the continent. However, we must caution that the materials presented here are only useful to the extent that one has a basic working knowledge of the dynamics of African politics.

Martin Rupiya

Bibliography

