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Violent Extremism in West Africa: Are Current Responses Enough?

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In recent years, West Africa and the Sahel have become a hotbed of predatory activities by violent extremist groups. A host of terrorist groups—including Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Ansarul Islam, and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), operating in Nigeria, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and other countries in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin—have wreaked destruction and exploited security vulnerabilities in carrying out sustained attacks against both civilian and security targets. Ominously, developments in Burkina Faso, which is fast becoming the epicenter of terrorist violence in the region, reveal the southward spread of terrorist activity, with possible consequences for West African coastal states such as Ghana, Benin, and Togo.[1]

To curb the expanding threat of terrorism, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), with significant support from external partners, has developed various strategies and mechanisms. While these mechanisms have helped, terrorism in West Africa nonetheless continues to flourish. Consequently, this paper examines the region's responses and recommends options for enhancing their effectiveness.

Overview of Trends and Impact

Current literature shows that new and old conditions combine to make West Africa and the Sahel ripe for

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terrorism. These conditions include economic underdevelopment; national authorities' failure to deliver public services; porous borders; fallout from Libya and other frontline states in the Global War on Terror; the export of Islam's deadly Sunni-Shia (Saudi-Iranian) rivalry into West Africa; terrorists' plundering of natural resources; and climate change-induced farmer-herder conflict. These conditions converge and overlap within the vast West Africa-Sahel expanse, with the hardest-hit areas stretching from the Lake Chad Basin in the east to Mali in the west, and engulfing Burkina Faso in the center.

In the Lake Chad Basin, Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) continue to exploit these new and old vulnerabilities to deepen insecurity there. The groups' terror attacks have spilled across multiple countries. Sustained attacks in this area since 2017 have generated disastrous statistics; for example, 2.5 million people are internally displaced persons (IDPs), 6.9 million people are severely food insecure, 515,000 children are suffering from acute malnutrition, and 11 million people are in urgent need of assistance.[2] Boko Haram's violence has hampered access to agriculture and land assets, deepening the Lake Chad Basin's complex humanitarian crisis that was already characterized by food insecurity, poverty, and environmental degradation.[3] Terrorist groups in the region have also gained notoriety for kidnapping and recruiting young boys and girls, conducting suicide bombings, using improvised explosive devices, carrying out ambushes in towns and villages, and pillaging farms. This continues to affect subsistence farming, the source of the economic livelihoods of most rural populations in the affected communities in West Africa.

In Mali, violent extremist groups, including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al Mourabitoun, Ansarul, Ansar al-Dine, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and ISGS, have exploited weak governance and growing poverty to destabilize the country. Meanwhile, climate change has further heightened human insecurity in Mali. Yet another factor fueling terrorism in Mali is the collapse of neighboring Libya following the fall of the Gadhafi regime in 2011.[4] Ethnic Tuareg rebels and radical Islamists returning from the fighting in Libya have exploited poor socio-economic conditions to destabilize northern Mali.[5]

Another worrying trend in terrorist and extremist activities in the Sahel is the spillover effect on nearby Burkina Faso. Armed terrorist groups operating along its borders with Niger and Mali have destabilized Burkina Faso, resulting in a humanitarian crisis there. As of January 2020, more than 2.2 million people, including 1.2 million children, have needed emergency humanitarian assistance. Also, the number of forcibly displaced people in Burkina Faso exploded from 87,000 to 487,000 in the first ten months of 2019 (44 percent of whom are children). Further complicating the situation is the fact that Burkina Faso is already hosting some 27,000 Malian refugees.[6] A recent UNICEF report outlines the humanitarian toll of Burkina Faso's violence and instability: 330,000 children in affected locales need psycho-social support; 2,000 schools have been closed (affecting another 330,000 children as well as 9,000 teachers);[7] 69 health facilities have been closed and 71 others limited to minimal operations (affecting 817,000 people);[8] and, 147,000 children under the age of five are suffering from severe acute malnutrition (including 86,000 children in seven emergency-affected regions of Burkina Faso).[9]

Regional Counterterrorism Initiatives

Although economic integration is the *raison d'etre* of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), regional instability and conflict have forced it to make conflict management a priority. This highlights the recognition that peace and security are catalytic to regional development.

A notable ECOWAS counterterrorism framework is its Protocol for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (1999). Article 3(4) calls for strengthening cooperation in peacekeeping operations, early warning, and in countering cross-border crime, international terrorism, and the proliferation of small arms and anti-personnel mines.[10] Despite the Protocol's provisions, however, several ECOWAS states have been slow to prioritize counterterrorism.[11]

Another ECOWAS counterterrorism initiative is the Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing in West Africa (GIABA), created in 1999. Its mandate is to strengthen the capacity of member states to prevent and control money laundering and terrorist financing.[12] GIABA's mandate has since been expanded to include providing technical assistance to member states and promoting cooperation in combating terrorism.[13] GIABA's efforts have led to actions by most ECOWAS counties to enact counterterrorism legislation and establish counterterrorism institutions.[14] However, some member states have been inconsistent in submitting required reports.[15]

The ECOWAS Counterterrorism Strategy and Implementation Plan is a third framework. Adopted in 2013, the strategy recommends member states use a three-pillar approach to countering terrorism—prevent, pursue, and reconstruct.[16] The "prevent" pillar requires member states to adopt and implement effective legal regimes, eliminate root causes of terrorism, enhance early warning systems and operational intelligence, counter extremism and radicalization, and promote democratic values and human rights. The "pursue" pillar is meant to enable members to undertake rapid action against terrorist attackers. The "reconstruct" pillar is aimed at rebuilding societies damaged by terrorism. The strategy further calls for creating several regional instruments: the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Coordinating Unit, ECOWAS Arrest Warrant, ECOWAS Black List of Terrorist and Criminal Networks, and ECOWAS Counterterrorism Manual.[17] Essentially, the ECOWAS Counterterrorism Strategy seeks to enhance the coordination of various regional, continental, and international counterterrorism instruments in West Africa, and to ensure a common framework for counterterrorism interventions. While the strategy provides a pro-active framework for countering terrorism in the region, implementation remains a challenge. Most ECOWAS countries are yet to adequately operationalize the strategy within their borders.

Continental and International Counterterrorism Support Mechanisms

Motivated by self-interest to contain the spread of terrorism, African and international actors have unveiled a number of counterterrorism initiatives to bolster ECOWAS's efforts. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), for example, was established in April 2012 and improved in 2015 by the Lake Chad Basin countries—Chad, Nigeria, Niger, and Cameroon, with additional contributions from Benin—with the aim of managing the Boko Haram crisis which started in Nigeria in 2002.[18] The MNJTF has made modest progress in degrading Boko Haram, arresting militants, rescuing hostages, and reclaiming areas previously controlled by Boko Haram and ISWAP. However, there have been concerns about flagrant human rights abuses and other violations against civilians in areas where MNJTF military operations have taken place. Extremist groups have leveraged these abuses to develop narratives that tap into the local population's resentment against the military in particular and the state in general.

The G5 Sahel Joint Force is a security partnership among Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Chad, and Mauritania aimed at countering terrorism, cross-border crime, and illicit trafficking in the Sahel region. The force was authorized by the AU Peace and Security Council in April 2017 and further strengthened by UN Security Council Resolution (UNCR) 2359 in June 2017.[19] Despite some successes, however, there are concerns that

the force's concept of operations could be incongruent with the various counterterrorism strategies in the region, and there have been calls for enhanced coordination to improve the force's efficiency.[20]

International partners, particularly France, the United States, the European Union (EU), and the UN, are active players in supporting West Africa's effort to curb terrorism. France has deployed 4,500 troops to the region (Operation Barkhane) to work with regional militaries and directly combat terrorist fighters in the Sahel.[21] Operation Barkhane is the largest French military operation abroad, costing USD$685 million a year.[22] At this time, its counterterrorist activities are focused on the Liptako border area between Mali and Niger and the Gourman border area between Mali and Burkina Faso.[23] These zones are strategic conduits used by ISGS, JNIM, and Ansarul Islam to move fighters into northern Burkina Faso and western Niger.[24] In Operation Barkhane, France has advanced its security agenda in the Sahel mainly through capacity building by training, sharing information, and providing equipment to support counterterrorism operations of the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the MNJTF. Yet despite France's increased military presence in the region, gains have been limited as Islamist militants continue to make effective use of guerilla tactics such as deploying improvised explosive devices and hiding within the civilian population before and after launching attacks.[25] Another shortcoming in France's approach is that most of its joint military cooperation is done on a bilateral basis with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger,[26] which illustrates a lack of holistic coordination and cooperation in its counterterrorism support efforts.

U.S. and EU counterterrorism support in West Africa and the Sahel is, like France's, also largely predicated on providing military capacity-building assistance. The U.S. and the EU support the G5 Sahel Joint Force and MNJTF in the areas of finance, equipment, training, and information-sharing. In addition, the U.S. and EU have various bilateral programs with Cameroon, Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Chad, and Niger to support these countries' national counterterrorism efforts.

Foreign military engagement in the fight against terrorism in West Africa has not come without concerns, however. For example, while U.S. drone strikes have been instrumental in destroying terrorist targets, they have also resulted in civilian fatalities, population displacement, and destruction of livelihoods. This has fueled resentment of local communities against foreign military activities in the region. At the same time, there are doubts about the U.S. military commitment to the region, given internal debate in Washington about reducing the U.S. military presence following recent attacks against U.S. soldiers deployed in the Sahel.[27]

Another international support mechanism in the Sahel is the AU-backed United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which was established by Security Council Resolution 2100 on April 25, 2013 to support political processes in Mali and carry out a number of security-related tasks.[28] With 13,289 troops and 1,920 police personnel,[29] MINUSMA has supervised presidential elections, supported an ongoing peace dialogue, and helped ensure relative security in communities in Mali's north and central regions that were previously controlled by terrorists and armed insurgent groups. Overall, however, Mali's security environment remains volatile and complex, as terrorists, armed insurgent groups, and intercommunal violence continue to surge. There are also concerns about limited space for local community participation in Mali's peace and security processes, as well as MINUSMA's inadequate capacity to carry out its mandate.[30] Under UN Security Council Resolution 2480, MINUSMA's mandate ran until June 2020. It was extended for an additional year on June 29, 2020.[31]

Key Challenges and Shortcomings

While ECOWAS has developed several counterterrorism policies and frameworks, which have been ratified by member states, domestication and implementation of such strategies across states continue to lag. As a

result, the major counterterrorism efforts in the region—MNJTF and G5 Sahel Task Force—are coalitions of the willing and rather than institutionalized mechanisms with a full regional character. In addition, the various counterterrorism responses described above have overcrowded West Africa's security landscape, leading to functional overlap as well as coordination challenges. The general lack of holistic coordination and cooperation among these disparate counterterrorism efforts undermines their effectiveness in curbing terrorism in the region.

Moreover, at the heart of the region's vulnerability to terrorism, violent extremism, and organized crime are human security challenges including climate change-driven depletion of the biodiversity and agriculture that support livelihoods. This and other human security challenges continue to fuel migration, displacements, and sometimes violent competition over limited resources and to exacerbate food insecurity, unemployment, access to healthcare, education, clean water, and other infrastructure necessary to enhance sustainable livelihoods. Yet international and regional response mechanisms to terrorist and extremist activities in the region have focused on traditional military approaches overlooking the human security deficits which drive and facilitate terrorism in the region. Additionally, various response strategies appear to be too generalized, often disregarding how terrorist activities intersect with governance issues, transnational organized crime, and communal conflicts to aggravate regional insecurity. The omnibus effect of this is reflected in a cocktail of continued attacks which has resulted in increased state and human security fragility across West Africa.

Another key challenge is that neither the MNJTF nor G5 Sahel has long-term and predictable sources of funding. Instead, both are heavily dependent on international funding, especially from the U.S., EU, and France. Between 2016 and 2017, the U.S. alone contributed USD$363 million to the MNJTF, making it the force's largest financial contributor.[32] Similarly, in 2018, the U.S. provided USD$111 million to the G5 Sahel Joint Force,[33] while in the same year the EU provided it with USD$116 million.[34] Operation Barkhane costs an additional USD$685 million per year, which constitutes about 50 percent of France's worldwide security cooperation budget.[35] This over-reliance on external funding is unsustainable but also prevents the region from taking real ownership for its own security. Aside from this, operational effectiveness—including troop deployments, capacity building, and logistical operations—of the various counterterrorism mechanisms in the region is further constrained by a lack of sustainable funding for the counterterrorism efforts of the MNJTF and the G5 Sahel Force.

Conclusion

Despite the varied counterterrorism responses of the multiple peace and security actors in West Africa, terrorist violence continues to surge in the region, with serious consequences for state and human security. This study examined the varied counterterrorism responses and found that while some gains have been made, significant challenges remain. These include inadequate coordination of the disparate counterterrorism strategies and mechanisms in the region and ECOWAS member states' lack of political will to implement the organization's security initiatives. This study concludes that disregarding such challenges would continue to hinder the effectiveness of the region's counterterrorism efforts, and thus provide further impetus for terrorist violence to flourish in West Africa and the Sahel. What is urgently needed is for the region's security actors and their international partners to enhance cooperation and more robustly align their disparate counterterrorism initiatives. It is also essential for West African governments to increase local community participation and inclusivity in order to bolster resilience against surging terrorist violence across the region.

For a set of policy options and recommendations related to countering violent extremism in West Africa, see the accompanying Africa Program Policy Brief No. 22 by Osei Baffour Frimpong.

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Cover Image: Members of the Nigerian Armed Forces respond to a simulated threat during an improvised explosive device awareness course in Niamey, Niger on October 11, 2019. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Air Force via Staff Sgt. Alex Fox Echols III. https://www.af.mil/News/Photos/igphoto/2002196394/mediaid/3742879/.

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