

## Terror Surge in West Africa: Enhancing Regional Responses

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In recent years, terrorism has increased alarmingly across West Africa and the neighboring Sahel, resulting in significant fatalities, internal displacement of persons, as well as economic and development devastation. The affected area encompasses the Lake Chad Basin and Sahel countries, with nearly every country affected by terrorism. West Africa and the Sahel are home to an estimated four million IDPs and about 800,000 refugees,<sup>1</sup> many of them driven from their homes by conflict or terrorist activity. Furthermore, terrorist threat in the region has continued to morph, with new groups emerging or forging ties with regional and/or international groups. The most prominent active groups in the region include Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM). Collectively, these terrorist groups are causing enormous insecurity in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and other countries in the Lake Chad Basin and the Sahel. In response, regional states and their international partners have established a number of mechanisms to address the scourge of violent extremism in West Africa.

### Regional and International Responses to Terrorism in West Africa

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has developed and activated counterterrorism strategies including the ECOWAS Counterterrorism Strategy (2013). Also, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and G5 Sahel Joint Force are the primary security initiatives through which the Lake Chad Basin countries (Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon) and Sahel countries (Chad, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso) seek to address violent extremism. International actors, especially France and the United States (U.S.), are also key actors in the counterterrorism efforts in the region. These efforts are occurring against the backdrop of the AU- and UN-backed United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in Mali.<sup>2</sup> For example, the French-led Operation Barkhane, established in August 2014, has been combating Jihadist violence in the Sahel region, while the U.S., through its Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), is helping the region develop resilient institutions capable of responding to terrorism.<sup>3</sup> Both the U.S. and France provide capacity-building support to the MNJTF and G5 Sahel Joint Force.

Despite all of these efforts, terrorist violence in the region has soared. In Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali alone, terrorist killings have multiplied five-fold since 2016, from an estimated 770 deaths in 2016 to over 4,000 in 2019 alone.<sup>4</sup> In the Lake Chad Basin, between June 2011 and June 2018, Boko Haram and ISWAP killed 34,261

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people<sup>5</sup> and caused 10.7 million more to seek humanitarian emergency assistance.<sup>6</sup> The number of people forcibly displaced from their homes in Burkina Faso alone exploded from 87,000 to 487,000 in the first 10 months of 2019 (44 percent of whom are children). It is important to ask why regional responses have not been effective in curbing violent extremism.

## **Countering Terrorism in West Africa: Key Challenges and Shortcomings**

One critical challenge to fighting terrorism in West Africa is the lack of complementarity between international and regional responses. For instance, while Nigeria is a major strategic player in countering Boko Haram and ISWAP attacks throughout the Lake Chad Basin, its national strategy for curbing extremist activities is viewed within the narrow prism of national security and territorial sovereignty, a view that has resulted in limited articulation with MNJTF efforts. Likewise, the G5 Sahel Joint Force is not integrated or coordinated with the AU's African Peace and Security Architecture, which is structured to facilitate collective security cooperation through the Regional Economic Communities (REC), including ECOWAS.<sup>7</sup> Given this mash-up of national, regional, continental, and international counterterrorism mechanisms in West Africa, clarifying their respective roles and reconciling their mandates is essential to the overall effectiveness of counterterrorism and stabilization efforts.

A second major shortcoming is regional governments and their international partners have largely focused on traditional military approaches to countering violent extremism while paying relatively minimal attention to underlying human security vulnerabilities such as unemployment, climate change, and diminishing resources to support livelihoods. This heavily military approach also diminishes local participation in countering violent extremism as traditional authorities, religious and ethnic leaders, women, youth groups, and civil society organizations are often on the periphery of counterterrorism efforts. A third 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.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in 2018, the U.S. provided USD\$111 million to the G5 Sahel Joint Force,<sup>9</sup> while in the same year the EU provided it with USD\$116 million.<sup>10</sup> Operation Barkhane costs an additional USD\$685 million per year, which constitutes about 50 percent of France's worldwide security cooperation budget.<sup>11</sup> This over-reliance on external funding is unsustainable but also prevents the region from taking real ownership for its own security. A fourth challenge is the overly generalized narrative about peace and security in West Africa that often disregards context-based vulnerabilities, resilience factors, and critical actors in the affected countries.<sup>12</sup> As such, strategies are often incongruent with prevailing dynamics of terrorism in the region.

Against the backdrop of the foregoing, this brief provides recommendations for strengthening efforts to counter the surging terrorist threat in West Africa.

## Policy Options and Recommendations

### 1. For the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and African Union

- a. Promote context-specific response strategies:** A major weakness in regional counterterrorism efforts is the pursuit of overly general strategies that disregard locality-specific vulnerabilities, resilience factors, and critical actors. The resulting incongruency between broad strategies and specific local dynamics hinders the efficacy of ECOWAS and AU counterterrorism efforts. In order to be more effective, strategies should take better accounting of local realities.
- b. Enhance coordination of responses:** The coexistence of multiple missions, including the MNJTF and G5 Sahel Joint Force, each with its own priorities, creates coordination and redundancy challenges. Therefore, the AU, ECOWAS, MNJTF, and G5 Sahel Joint Force troop-contributing countries should work to maximize coordination and synergy.
- c. Prioritize human security in counter-terrorism strategies:** The military-centric approach has not been able to address the underlying governance grievances and human security challenges that fuel violent extremism. Thus, regional response strategies should include addressing issues such as food security, climate change, and poor governance in order to mitigate vulnerabilities to terrorists' recruitment and radicalization tactics.

### 2. For West African Governments

- a. Meet regional commitments to peace and security funding:** To ensure sustainable funding for the broader region's counterterrorism operations, West African states must regularly allocate monies from their national budgets to support regional counterterrorism efforts, and also explore ways of engaging the private sector (businesses, civil society, community groups) in the fight against violent extremism.

### 3. For International Partners

- a. Ensure stronger coordination and articulation of strategies:** The U.S., France, EU, and UN are key international partners, each with their own counterterrorism strategy and varied priorities. While these international partners have some level of coordination among them, articulation and complementarity with regional efforts is lacking, which hinders progress. They, therefore, need to conjoin their strategies with regional responses and ensure complementarity in counterterrorism efforts in the region.

For an in-depth analysis on countering violent extremism in West Africa, see the accompanying Africa Program Research Paper No. 28 by Osei Baffour Frimpong.

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