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## **Extremist Radicalism and Terrorist Inroads in West Africa: Understanding the Threat**

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### **Abstract**

While research has not yet established the regional consequences of terrorism, its immediate effects on states that have been hit (i.e. Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Nigeria), and the spill over effects in neighbouring countries cannot be discounted. This paper analyses the challenge of violent extremism in Africa based on existing evidence from across the West African sub- region. It pays particular attention to the recruitment of young people in Africa into extremist causes on the continent and beyond and proffers measures for their curtailment. The paper argues that terrorism in contemporary Africa undermines democratization, good governance, peace and security and regional development. It also recommends three-pronged strategies for addressing the miasma of extremist radicalism and its associated violence in West Africa, namely, governance, development and security reforms. While it may be difficult to absolutely curtail the activities of terrorist organizations in West Africa. Countries with minimal vulnerabilities like Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia and others should intensify efforts towards increased border and cyber security surveillance, sustained de-radicalization programmes and youth empowerment programmes to curb unemployment in earnest.

**Keywords:** Civil Society, Extremism, Governance, Radicalisation, Recruitment, Terrorism.

### **Introduction**

The African continent and the West African sub-region in particular face serious state and human security challenges. Many of these challenges are caused by armed conflicts, political instabilities as well as deficient democracy and governance systems. Due to many security concerns of the continent, Africa has been described as an unstable region (Fawole, & Ukeje, 2005), and a

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veritable theatre of violent conflicts (Adebajo, 2004). The challenges of the continent of Africa are far reaching leading to deplorable living conditions for many.

In addition to these woes, Africa battles with an eminent insurgence of terrorism in many of its regions. Terrorist groups and their activities have taken on dimensions of domesticity and Trans nationality in Africa over the past decade. Terrorist groups like al-Shabaab and Boko Haram are now boundary blind to the extent of unleashing atrocious attacks on countries other than those they have traditionally operated in.\* The trans nationality of terrorism and new strategies of recruiting foreign nationals to join terrorist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has made the threat a global one. Attacks by al-Shabaab in Nairobi (Kilcullen, 2013), Boko Haram in Nigeria (Oyeniya, 2010) and later in Mali and Burkina Faso show the closeness of the threat to terror –free West African countries.†

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is combining its traditional radical interpretation of Islam with modern technology to expand its sphere of influence. Through the internet and social media, the ISIL is expanding its sphere of influence beyond national boundaries. Indeed, the evidence suggests that citizens of other African countries are fighting for other terrorist organizations such as Al -Shabaab and Al -Qaeda in the Maghreb (Bertram, & Ellison, 2014). Therefore, this calls for continuous monitoring to prevent these terrorist activities in other West African countries. There is evidence that ISIL is successfully radicalising and recruiting foreigners to fight its cause (Winter, 2016) which is an alarming global threat.

Using existing materials and secondary sources of data, this paper presents an analysis of the threat of terrorism in West Africa. The paper gives an overview of terrorist activities in the West African sub-region using trend analysis. It outlines some of the factors responsible for the local radicalization of terrorist groups. The structure of these terrorist groups, their financial bases and armaments are discussed. It also examines the extent of reach of terrorist groups on the internet and other social media platforms as well as their recruitment processes and the challenges they pose to the sub-region's resolve to deal with terrorism. The paper makes a strong case for the continuous monitoring of the activities of these terrorist groups to prevent their activities from escalating into neighbouring countries and suggests measures for the prevention of these groups' operations.

### **Trends of Terrorist Activities in West Africa**

Onuoha and Ezirim (2013) draw an intriguing relationship between transnational organized crime (TOC) and terrorism in the West African Sub -region. They argue that, this relationship further complicates the fragile security landscape of the sub-region. Indeed, considering the funding sources and methods of terrorist groups, it would be natural to conclude that proceeds from these TOCs go to fund terrorist activities in the sub-region. The existence of militant groups, organized criminal gangs and the relationship between their activities all around the world is not a recent phenomenon (Onuoha, & Ezirim, 2013). In recent times however, their manifestation and intricate linkages in Africa, with terrorist footprints are disturbingly increasing. This is largely due to the activities of al- Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Ansar Dine, Boko Haram and Jammtu Ansarul Musilimina Fi Biladis Sudan (Ansaru) in addition to other militant networks on the continent.

In a space of just about five years (spanning 2010 – 2016), Africa saw a great number of terrorist incidents with related deaths, human displacement and devastation. Till today, Africa continues to witness deadly attacks by Islamist groups. The year 2015 alone saw a number of prominent attacks in Africa. Boko Haram extremists armed with guns and explosives in the early part of 2015 stormed and torched a village in Nigeria killing scores of people, including children.

\* al- Shabaab planned and launched attacks and suicide bombings in Somalia, Kenya, and Djibouti in 2014 alone. Its Kenyan attack, killing 200 people in towns and villages along its borders has remained the deadliest terrorist attack on Kenya in its history. Boko Haram committed hundreds of attacks resulting in over 5,000 deaths in 2014 alone with violent spill overs into neighbouring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.

† On January 15, 2015, gunmen stormed a cafe popular with foreigners in Burkina Faso's capital, and then attacked a nearby luxury hotel. They killed at least 30 people after more than 12-hour siege similar to a Bamako Hotel assault in Mali which also happened on November 30. The al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) claimed responsibility for this attack.

It was the latest of a series of deadly attacks attributed to the ISIL-affiliated terror group. In a related case, two female suicide bombers attacked a mosque in a town near Cameroon's border with Nigeria, killing 10 people and injuring many others ([News24, 2017](#)).

Al-Shabaab fighters stormed and took over a beachfront restaurant in Somalia's capital, Mogadishu in which more than 20 people were killed in the same year. Earlier on January 15, al-Shabaab had attacked an African Union base in Somalia, killing a number of Kenyan peacekeepers. Similar to the Bamako Hotel assault in Mali, gunmen stormed a cafe popular with foreigners in Burkina Faso's capital, and then attacked a nearby luxury hotel, killing at least 30 people after more than 12-hour siege. The al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) claimed responsibility for these attacks ([Guled, 2016](#)).

This spate of attacks points to an arc of terrorism that is spreading its wings over Africa. The region is firmly in the grip of a network of Islamic militant groups, ranging from al-Shabaab in Somalia to Boko Haram in Nigeria, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb along with affiliate groups of ISIS in Libya. Boko Haram and al-Shabaab are the most prolific and active groups by far but, recently, AQIM has expanded its reach, shifting its target from the UN and foreign military personnel to civilians. Countries such as Nigeria, Somalia, Mali and Libya have emerged as the fulcrum of terrorism, impacting and threatening neighbouring countries including Kenya, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad and Djibouti among others. While research has not yet established the regional consequences of terrorism, its immediate effects on states that have been hit (i.e. Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Nigeria), and the spill over effects in neighbouring countries cannot be overestimated in any way. One finds loss of civilian lives, destruction of infrastructure and kidnapping among others in these areas. Attacks by Boko Haram alone between 2009 and 2014 for example claimed well over 13,000 lives, displaced some 1.5 million and devastated the already impoverished North-eastern part of Nigeria ([Salihu, 2015](#)).

Many factors such as weak states, porous borders, availability of small arms and light weapons, relatively free movement of persons and goods, the youth bulge, and the growing networks of transnational criminals underlie these terrorist activities. Indeed, despite the fragmentation of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, weak or failed governance continue to provide an enabling environment for the emergence of extremist radicalism and violence, notably in Yemen, Syria, Libya, Nigeria, and Iraq. The statistics of terrorist activities within and across West African states are worrying. Particularly notable is the major intensification of terrorism in Nigeria. Nigeria saw the largest increase in terrorist deaths ever recorded by any country between 2014 and 2015. Terrorist deaths increased by over 300 per cent to a height of 7,512 fatalities in the space of one year. Boko Haram, which operates mainly in Nigeria, has become the deadliest single terrorist group in the world today. Muddying the waters, Boko Haram pledged allegiance to ISIL (the Islamic State) as the Islamic State's West Africa Province in March 2015 ([Institute for Economics and Peace, IEP, 2015](#)).

### **Terrorist Groups' Finances and Armaments**

Terrorist groups and the threat they pose to the world has changed overtime but one thing has remained relatively stable – that is their need to raise, move and use funds ([FATF, 2013](#)). While some would want to consider it unimportant, our knowledge of the sources of funding methods, could serve as a great leap in the fight against terrorism. A good understanding of how terrorist groups manage their finances is critical to current efforts to reduce terrorism.

Traditionally, terrorist groups have operated through private donations, abuse and misuse of non-profit organizations, proceeds from criminal activities like drugs, extortion of local and diasporic populations and businesses, kidnapping for ransom, legitimate commercial enterprises, and state sponsorships. The literature shows that funds for terrorist groups have traditionally moved through bank transfers, money value transfer systems, and physical transportation of cash.

There are however emerging terrorist financing threats and vulnerabilities worth discussing. These threats include foreign terrorist fighters and their funding needs. Self-funding by foreign terrorist fighters makes it difficult to trace funding sources today. There has also emerged a new strategy of raising funds through social media. Another key threat is the use of new payment products and services like virtual currencies, prepaid cards and internet based payment services. The exploitation of natural resources like oil and gas and the mining of minerals also pose a great

threat to fighting terrorism from the financial front because a lot of wealth from these sources gets into the hands of these terror groups.

Tied in to the cash flows, terrorist groups have often possessed an array of deadly weapons. Terrorist groups are usually well armed. Their armaments range from sophisticated metal weapons to deadly chemical weapons. They have also often used localised weaponry including cutlasses and simple metals depending on the scale of the operation. The continuous escalation of the transfer of arms and armaments across borders to third world countries, and the apparent ease with which it is often done cannot be overlooked. The arms easily fall into rogue hands. This practice is overtly and covertly engaged in by some powerful countries of the world, and is a great source of supplies for these radical extremist and terrorist groups within the sub-region and in other parts of the world. These supplies are a tacit way of gaining influence by these powerful countries.

While a great chunk of their funds is used for terrorist acts, some parts of it is used for other activities. Propaganda and recruitment are examples of such activities. The process as has been described earlier is rigorous and financially involving. They also set some of these funds aside as salaries and compensation for the leaders, members and families of jailed and deceased members. For many of the groups according to existing research reports, they use their funds to establish a system that provides social services to populations. This function of their financial resources is meant to essentially build support for the group among local populace which in effect makes recruitment easier. The groups usually establish or subsidize social institutions to provide social, educational and health services for people to undermine legitimate governments and their efforts.

### **Terrorist Recruitments and the Extent of Reach**

Clearly, the fact that a Ghanaian youth could travel to join ISIL shows that “Jihadism” is more globalized today than it had ever been before. Due to the current rise of Islamic state in the international media, the activities of the modern-day caliphate is now a very familiar thing to many people. The term “foreign fighter” as Winter would describe it, has also “become an almost ubiquitous rubric” (Winter, 2016, p.5). It is indeed quite paradoxical to find that despite the terror they visit on the world, terrorist groups continue to recruit young people from all around the world with great success. It is important to know what propaganda machinery these terrorist groups employ in this recruitment. This section in an effort to understand how terrorists’ groups have succeeded in attracting tens of thousands of fighters from as many as 86 countries across the globe, discusses some recruitment strategies of the groups with emphasis on ISIS/ ISIL.

Bertram and Ellison in an assessment of terrorist acts in Africa and Sub Saharan Africa describes terrorist recruitment as being facilitated by the adoption of social media technology (Bertram, & Ellison, 2014). In their study, they observed a strong trend of web publishers of social media technologies among terrorist groups. Many young people are thus becoming radicalized and travelling from around the world to join terrorist groups via the internet and social media. Winter (2016) is of the view that the media prominence of Islamic State obstructs people’s understanding of recruitment in terrorist groups. The sheer number of people who have joined ISIL in the past decade alone makes people think of their recruitment as a short term or instantaneous activity. The evidence available however proves otherwise. The terrorist recruitment process is an elaborate and well-structured one (Horgan, 2008; Winter, 2016).

Three complimentary mechanisms used in Islamic state’s recruitment into violent extremism have been identified by researchers. These mechanisms are the echo chamber, the propaganda, and the enlister. The process begins with the echo chamber which is one’s exposure to and absorption into a jihadist micro-community (Winter, 2016). This exposure and absorption happens both online and offline just as their future interaction too. Interaction within this micro-community could and often does catalyse a recruits’ radicalization. This isolates the individual and hardens his or her extremist learnings. This process is particularly serious because of its sociological significance. There is a deliberate effort to circumvent ongoing adult socialisation in the life of the potential candidate. As the individual avoids his/her everyday influencers in society and other valid channels of information, pro-Islamic state persuasions are then amplified through propaganda. This propaganda comes in the form of messages, videos, etc meant to gradually realign the moral norms of the curious individual. Once the first two mechanisms are done, a crucial third party is introduced – the enlister. It is widely believed that the echo-chamber and propaganda by

themselves hardly ever lead to recruitment without the activity of the enlister (source). The enlister is “a provider of logistical information and a humanizer of risk” (Winter, 2016, p.6).

While there are a few cases of recruitments offline, much of the literature emphasize the usage of online resources especially through social media (Bolt, 2012). On social media, people follow like-minded individuals and groups who tend to share views which are similar to theirs. This gradual process overtime exposes one to a clique of selected individuals from where the process builds on. Once this is done, the rigorous propaganda begins. The recruit is fed with as much material as possible until he or she begins to participate in the propagandist role. Then the enlister suffices to now continue different levels of interaction with the recruit. Enlisters are active influencers, usually a deviant peer who has already joined the group, desirous of evangelising and attracting others. The enlister gives a lot of advice and offer logistical support and networks to the recruit. It is the success of their activities that finally gets the individual recruited. Conversation with the enlister can thus be tagged and appropriately so as the tipping point for the recruit.

Reports indicate that many of these targets in this exercise are the youth. An even more troubling trend reported in the literature is the involvement of women and children in the recruitment to join the caliphate (Allison, & Barnes, 2015). These are curious vulnerable young women and children who regard these violent extremists on the internet as role models. The children in particular see the violent extremists as people living the jihadist dream which they aspire to live.

### **Prevention, Containment, and Curtailment of Terrorist Operations: The Way Forward**

The discussion so far makes it clear without equivocation that terrorism is closer to many West African states than it was a decade ago and requires an urgent effort to safeguard the borders of countries and prevent internal fettering of terrorist groups and their activities. The paper suggests a three-thronged approach towards prevention and responding to terrorism in countries in the sub region. These include governance, development and security measures (Onuoha, & Ezirim, 2013).

These measures are suggested on the strengths of the problem of extremist radicalisation and terrorism. There are several factors/ reasons for the fettering of terrorist activities in Africa and the West African sub- region. Ray makes a veritable list of reasons for which Islamist groups have been operating with relative success in Africa. Ray attributes the success of terrorist operations to a combination of factors which include weak and corrupt states, porous national borders, lack of governing institutions, and ungoverned spaces. Others include under-trained and under-equipped military, socio economic discontent of populations, underdevelopment, poverty, unemployment, and conflicts (Ray, 2016).

On the governance front, there is the need for the strengthening of institutions and processes that will promote efficiency, transparency and accountability in the management of national resources across each nation. The rule of law should also be upheld with the strengthening of the courts and law enforcement agencies. This will help enforce sanctions for human rights violations and diligently prosecute criminals and militants that may arise in these countries. Also, social inclusion should be deliberately fostered in West Africa. This could be achieved through democracy and the broadening of the political space to accommodate all manner of people and groups. Besides, recent reports on the quality and quantity of democratic governance in West Africa have been negative. Incessant ethno-religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria and the inability of the state to perform its basic social provisioning roles, particularly in areas of job creation, youth empowerment, provision of free quality education, partisan politics have greatly been responsible for the preponderance of extremist radicalism in the region. Thus, building sustainable democratic institutions anchored upon the delivery of the dividends of good governance to the people is a viable measure to addressing the upsurge of terrorist movement in Africa and the West African sub-region in particular.

On the development pedestal, West African governments should work to provide functional support for the poor and unemployed youth. There should be a sustained and concerted effort at building a meritorious and equitable environment for fair treatment in work spaces. West African states could also seek international support to effectively fight TOCs facilitated across borders. Considering its trans-nationality, fighting terrorism along the borders should be by collaborative

effort with other neighbouring countries. Security efforts should be much less combative and concentrate on intelligence gathering on militant group activities to inform proactive responses.

There is also the urgent need for regional collaboration in the fight against illicit drugs, small and light weapons proliferation and cross boundary movement of radical Jihadist fighters on the African continent. In line with this, national and regional bureaucracies should be encouraged and resourced to train experts in the fields of counterterrorism. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that military efforts, increased information sharing and improved border security have contributed to reducing the number of fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq to join ISIL. Training of bureaucrats and security personnel will help in the building of a clear profile of terrorist and foreign fighters.

The role of women and children in terrorist-related activities is becoming more prominent. In order to prevent the radicalisation of women and children, West African countries and the regional body (ECOWAS) need to invest in getting a better understanding of the factors that draw women and children to violence and develop targeted interventions. For this to be effective however, it will require the involvement of civil society organisations especially those with proven grassroots operations.

Some of the terrorist attacks appear to have come from lone actors who may have 'loosely' been in touch with operatives of ISIL through encrypted social media applications. The misuse of communication technology by terrorist organisations must be prevented by working more closely together with internet service providers. This is not to suggest a censorship per se but some level of activity of security operatives on new media platforms should help.

Finally, financial intelligence is a key component for all counter terrorism activities ([FATF, 2013](#)). This is because without adequate financial resources, no terrorist organisation could function effectively. Thus, a clear understanding of funding sources and methods of terrorist groups could help to starve the groups and eventually disrupt their programmes and activities in the long run.

It is important to state that none of these measures is possible in the absence of a vibrant civil society and the media. Scholars and practitioners alike recognize the centrality of governance capacity to achieve sustainable peace and development objectives. Efforts towards the eradication of extreme poverty, access to services and livelihoods, promotion of economic growth, environmental protection and gender equality among others cannot be sustained in the absence of a vibrant civil society.

Despite their known challenges, civil society organisations (CSOs) over the years have shown leadership in the promotion of inclusive governance that is characterized by the principles of accountability, transparency, participation, access, equity, subsidiarity and the rule of law ([Popovski, Cheema, Lowry & Notaras, 2008](#)). As Popovski et al. (2008) note, the world has seen a marked increase in the number, diversity, focus and influence of CSOs since the early 1990s. These bodies have been found to function effectively at the local, national, regional and global levels. Their approach stems from CSOs' recognition that improving the quality of democratic governance processes requires actions at all levels. While this approach exists in the decentralisation concept in theory, it has not yielded any valuable results on the political front. The increasingly integrated nature of the world requires active civil society engagement especially at the local level with the complement of open and transparent national political institutions.

## **Conclusion**

Africa and West Africa in particular has seen groups initially thought to be normal transform into very deadly groups. In most cases, these terror groups come to be as a result of a complex of factors within their countries of origin with external support. As has been made clear in this paper, the effects of the activities of terrorist groups on their countries and the spill over effects on their neighbours have been increasingly monumental.

While we recognise that the challenge of terrorism in Africa has become herculean, efforts at combating them require a well thought out and coordinated programme. States have often been reactive in their effort to deal with terrorism and we argue that such efforts only result in marginal short –term results. In seeking to counter jihadist recruitment in particular, efforts and policies must be proactive and take into account antecedents to radicalisation and not the acts of terror themselves. An integrated, society-led approach backed by strong security intelligence is required

to successfully prevent terrorism and also deal with this growing menace in the West African sub-region.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare the work has no conflicts of interest.

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