



## KOFI ANNAN INTERNATIONAL PEACEKEEPING TRAINING CENTRE

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# The Center Can Hold: Towards a Regional Approach to Combating West Africa's Terrorists

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#### SUMMARY

Terrorist activities have assumed an alarming dimension in several West African countries. Various measures by states and international actors have achieved minimal success in the fight against terrorists. This brief calls for effective implementation of the ECOWAS counterterrorism strategy which provides a set of measures and strategic policy directions to contain the threat posed by terrorism to the region.

#### Introduction

Terrorism is a threat to international peace and security. West Africa, in particular, has seen an increase in terrorism especially in the Sahel region.<sup>1</sup> Cases include deadly terrorist attacks in Mali and Nigeria. For example, the Boko Haram<sup>2</sup> insurgency recorded 305 and 137 attacks in 2012 and 2013 respectively.<sup>3</sup> In 2014, this group killed about 7,711

people and claimed responsibility for nearly 90 percent of all terrorist acts in Nigeria.<sup>4</sup> Again, on 15 April 2014, Boko Haram attacked a girls' school in Chibok, northern Nigeria and abducted over 250 young girls sparking global outrage.<sup>5</sup> These atrocities have attracted regional and international condemnation and renewed efforts to curb the

<sup>1</sup> The region's porous borders and close proximity to trouble spots in the Maghreb, Middle East, and Persian Gulf makes it most susceptible to transnational criminal networks and terrorist infiltration.

<sup>2</sup> The official name is Jama'atu Ahlissunnah Lidda'awati wal Jihad, meaning a "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad"

<sup>3</sup> IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, (2014), Global Terrorism and Insurgency Attacks Rapidly Increase in Five Years. 13 February. Available at <http://press.ihs.com/press-release>. [Accessed on 21 August 2014].

<sup>4</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, (2014), *Global Terrorism Report: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism*, New York: IEP; see also [www.irinnews.org/report/101000/boko-haram-and-nigeria-s-elections](http://www.irinnews.org/report/101000/boko-haram-and-nigeria-s-elections).

<sup>5</sup> Mantzikos, I. (2014). Boko Haram Attacks in Nigeria and Neighbouring Countries: A Chronology of Attacks. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 8, December. Available at: <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/391>. [Accessed on 20 April 2015].

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growing threats of terrorist and religious extremist groups.

The menace of terrorism emerged from complex and deep rooted political, economic, social and developmental deficits. While religion, especially political Islam, is often cited as a primary cause of terrorism, it is not the immediate cause since religious groups in West Africa have coexisted peacefully for centuries. Nonetheless, in recent times, religious extremism, particularly its violent radicalization, has become the fault line used by terrorist groups to garner support and sympathy for their actions, as well as to guarantee recruitment. Groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Boko Haram, Ansar Dine, Ansar Sharia, and Jama'atul Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan (JAMS - Ansaru) have become major sources of insecurity in the region. These political and social entities constitute an 'unholy alliance' of like-minded movements or 'strange bedfellows' operating in an 'arc of instability' in the region.<sup>6</sup>

While the *regional consequences* of terrorism are yet to be established, one cannot discount the immediate effects on states such as Mali, Niger and Nigeria, and potential spillover effects in neighbouring countries. This is evident in the loss of civilian lives, destruction of infrastructure and kidnappings. For example since 2009, attacks by Boko Haram alone have killed about 13,000 people, displaced about 1.5 million and devastated the already impoverished northeastern Nigeria.<sup>7</sup> It has also overstretched Nigeria's security service and even spilled over into neighbours such as Niger, Cameroun and Chad.<sup>8</sup> Boko Haram has in recent

times carried out attacks in Cameroon and used the country as place to rest and stock up with arms and food. It also kidnapped the wife of the Cameroonian Vice Prime Minister, a local religious leader, eight French nationals and 10 Chinese workers in 2014.<sup>9</sup> In Mali, terrorist and separatist groups continue to undermine ongoing peacekeeping operations. For instance, on 7 March 2015, a deadly terrorist attack took place in Bamako, claiming the lives of five civilians and injuring seven others, including two United Nations staff.

As a result of these attacks, West African states have enacted domestic anti-terrorism legislation. In the past, there was little attention paid to dealing with terrorism as most states prioritized tackling challenges of poverty, conflict, and underdevelopment. Now, various West African states pursue national, bilateral and regional efforts to counter terrorism, albeit with mixed outcomes. This brief argues that terrorism in West Africa poses a potential regional security predicament. Many factors such as weak states, porous borders, availability of small arms and light weapons (SALW), relatively free movement of persons and goods, the youth bulge, and the growing networks of transnational criminals make terrorism a regional concern that requires holistic regional responses. This especially holds true for West Africa as most countries do not have sufficient human capacity, resources, legal frameworks and technology to fight terrorism. For instance, several factors such as security sector corruption, mismanagement and lack of resources have constrained the Nigerian security force's response to the Boko Haram threat over the

<sup>6</sup> Aning, K., (2014), Transnational Security Threats and Challenges to Peacekeeping in Mali. *Conflict Trends*, 14(2), pp. 11-17.

<sup>7</sup> Varied data exist on Boko Haram casualties. See United Nations Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, (2014), *Humanitarian Bulletin: Nigeria*, Issue 03, April 2; The Council on Foreign Relations' Nigeria Security Tracker records 21,135 deaths from May 2011 to May 2015. Available at: <http://www.cfr.org>

<sup>8</sup> International Crisis Group, (2014), 'Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency', *Africa Report* No. 216, 3 April 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Aljazeera, (2014), 'Boko Haram kidnaps wife of Cameroon vice PM', July 27. Available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2014/07/boko-haram-kidnaps-wife-cameroon-vice-pm-2014727121842187354.html>

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years.<sup>10</sup> However, a recent military offensive by Nigerian, Cameroonian and Chadian forces in the run-up to Nigeria's elections in 2015 led to major setbacks for the terrorist group, pushing it out of some strongholds. While sporadic attacks still occur, this development clearly shows that with the appropriate strategies, political will and resources, terrorism can be contained. This brief, therefore, examines prospects and challenges of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Counter-Terrorism Strategy and Implementation Plan (hereafter known as the ECOWAS Strategy)

### ECOWAS and Counter-Terrorism Initiatives

Each region in Africa has its own peculiar security and terrorist threats that require specially devised responses. In this regard, ECOWAS has established various legal mechanisms and normative frameworks to deal with West Africa's security challenges. With particular reference to terrorism, Article 3 of the ECOWAS Protocol for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (1999) stipulates that combating international terrorism is an objective of the regional body.<sup>11</sup> Another initiative is the Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering (GIABA), which is mandated to strengthen the capacity of member states to prevent and control money laundering and terrorist financing in the region.<sup>12</sup> The West African Police Chiefs and Committee of Chiefs of Security Services also play important functions. Nonetheless, these and several other initiatives have not adequately curbed terrorism in the region. ECOWAS therefore took a further step at the 42<sup>nd</sup> Ordinary Session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government in February 2013 to adopt a

Political Declaration and Common Position against Terrorism. This resulted in the ECOWAS Counterterrorism Strategy and Implementation Plan. Again, at the 42<sup>nd</sup> Extraordinary Session of the Authority of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government held in Accra, Ghana, on 30 May 2014, ECOWAS reaffirmed its determination to combat terrorist threats.

The purpose of the Declaration and the Strategy is to provide a common operational framework for action to prevent and eradicate terrorism and related criminal acts in West Africa, while protecting human security and creating the enabling conditions for sound economic development and the overall wellbeing of all citizens of West Africa.<sup>13</sup> This strategy also seeks to give effect to regional, continental and international counter-terrorism instruments, such as the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism and its Protocol; the African Union (AU) Plan of Action on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism in Africa, and all other decisions and measures taken by the AU, including the Comprehensive African Anti-Terrorism Model Law.<sup>14</sup>

The ECOWAS strategy adopts a three-pronged approach to counter terrorism: *prevent, pursue and reconstruct*. This approach is informed by the view that member states should as a matter of priority make every possible effort to prevent terrorism from occurring. If prevention fails, they should pursue and bring to justice at all costs the perpetrators of terrorist acts and repair any damage that such acts may cause to individuals and society as a whole.<sup>15</sup> Positive results of this three-pronged approach require systematic and effective implementation at all levels. In this regard, the first pillar requires member states

<sup>10</sup> Blanchard, L. P., (2014), 'Nigeria's Boko Haram: Frequently Asked Questions', Congressional Service Report, June 10

<sup>11</sup> ECOWAS (1999). Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, 10 December, Abuja: ECOWAS. Available at: <http://wwwsec.ecowas.int/sitecedeo/english/ap101299.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering (GIABA) (2010). Strategic Plan 2011-2014.

<sup>13</sup> ECOWAS, (2013). ECOWAS Political declaration and common position against terrorism, 28 February, Yamoussoukro.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

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to undertake a wide range of activities to prevent the occurrence of terrorism. This includes monitoring political, socio-economic and cultural activities to eliminate conditions conducive for terrorism. The second pillar seeks to enable member states to undertake rapid and effective responses to terrorism when it occurs. This pillar, anchored on criminal justice, provides for both military and non-military responses to terrorism. The third pillar deals with the aftermath of a terrorist act and is aimed at rebuilding society, reasserting state authority and enabling the state to heal social wounds caused by terrorism and counter-terrorism activities.<sup>16</sup>

The strategy recognizes that mutual legal assistance in the area of intelligence, investigation, prosecution and counter-terrorism operation is an absolute necessity to meet the shortfall and disparities in capabilities of member states. Member states are entrusted with the primary responsibility for the full and effective implementation of this strategy. The implementation plan recommends specific actions to be undertaken at various levels to realize the goals of the strategy. It outlines the establishment of structures such as the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Coordination Unit and features like the ECOWAS Arrest Warrant and Black List of Terrorist and Criminal Networks. It also calls for the adoption of an ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Training Manual and establishment of a training centre for counter-terrorism capacity building. In order to ensure continued focus on implementation of the strategy, and to regularly reassess progress and challenges, member states are expected to agree on a time frame for periodic evaluation and reporting on the

measures taken and challenges encountered in the implementation of the strategy.<sup>17</sup>

### Prospects and Challenges

The Declaration and the Strategy constitute the first major ECOWAS policy framework adopted specifically to deal with terrorism. This is in a context of sensitivity in the political discourse on terrorism and counterterrorism in (West) Africa. Many continue to view terrorism as a predominantly Western narrative, or a “Western problem,” and counter-terrorism as a Western-imposed priority. It has been argued that more people are directly affected by disease, crime, poverty, and hunger than by terrorism.<sup>18</sup> This line of thought overlooks the intricate nexus between security and development. As recent incidents of terrorism show, the region's development agenda is hampered so long as it remains vulnerable to terrorism. For example, the fight against Boko Haram has led to a surge in Nigeria's defence spending to an estimated US\$2.35bn and US\$2.25 in 2013 and 2014 respectively.<sup>19</sup> This increase in expenditure has come at the detriment of development in the largely impoverished north of Nigeria in particular, and the rest of the country in general.

Although it is too early to assess the effectiveness of the strategy, it is not clear whether the declaration and the strategy and implementation plan can adequately combat terrorism in West Africa. The collective security approach of ECOWAS is laudable but has its own problems. The critical issue is the preparedness of ECOWAS and its member states to ensure compliance and effective implementation of the strategy. It has been observed severally that

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<sup>16</sup> ECOWAS, (2013), 'ECOWAS Political declaration and common position against terrorism, 28 February, Yamoussoukro; Ewi, M. (2013), 'West Africa: The new ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy and Its Implications' *ISS Today*, 13 March, Available at <http://www.issafrica.org/iss-today> (accessed on 17 June 2014)

<sup>17</sup> ECOWAS, (2013), op.cit. p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> Ipe, J., James Cockayne and Alistair Millar, (2010). Implementing the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in West Africa, Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation.

<sup>19</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, (2015). 'Chapter Nine: Sub-Saharan Africa', *The Military Balance*, 115:1, 421-480, DOI:10.1080/04597222.2015.996365

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compliance and implementation of ECOWAS normative frameworks are often fraught with challenges such as inadequate financial and technical resources, and lack of political will and coordination among member states. In addition, the dependence of external funding to implement regionally agreed goals tend to affect the realization of those goals in cases of non-availability of funds.

Furthermore, the region arguably is fertile ground for breeding terrorist networks due to the prevalence of transnational criminal networks, illegal firearms manufacturing and trafficking, armed robbery, piracy, money laundering, illegal natural resource transfers, human and drug trafficking. The root causes of the precarious security in the region can be linked to governance deficits, poverty, underdevelopment and youth unemployment. These contribute to conflicts and proliferation of criminal groups that are ready to collaborate with terrorists in order to undermine security in the region. More worrying is the youth bulge without corresponding economic growth and social safety nets. Most often, frustration and alienation drive many to join ethnic, religious, or political groups, some of which may be hostile to the state. For example, it has been proven concretely that problems of insecurity and Boko Haram insurgency arose from bad governance, injustice, poverty, corruption, unemployment, among other factors.<sup>20</sup> States need to address these structural issues.

The levels of ratification and implementation of the 18 international instruments relating to counter-terrorism have been mixed in the region. It is illustrative to note that all states in the region have ratified at least seven of the universal instruments. All states in the region have also submitted at least one report to the UN Security Council Counter-

Terrorism Committee (CTC) pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1373 adopted in 2001.<sup>21</sup> However, actual implementation of the mechanisms at national level has been patchy. For instance, some member states have established national mechanisms such as counter-terrorism units and other centralized structures to coordinate national counter-terrorism measures. These include regulations of financial institutions aimed at reducing the abuse of financial systems by criminal and terrorist networks. Nonetheless, criminal groups are able to take advantage of loopholes to access their illicit finance.

Moreover, there is a wide gap between policy rhetoric and the reality on the ground especially in terms of legislation related to foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) in West African states. Currently, a number of nationals from the region are being recruited into various terror groups in the region and beyond. Individuals are often attracted into such groups through religious and political zeal and material benefits. The growing involvement of FTF in various conflicts and terrorist activities constitutes an increasing danger to international peace and security. The threat posed by FTF goes beyond the end-target countries to include the countries of origin and transit. Again, the threat of individuals who travel to conflict zones to become more radicalized is more serious as these individuals receive advanced combat training and return to their home countries to carry out terrorist acts.<sup>22</sup> However, there is a lack of coherent legislation to criminalize the phenomenon of FTF, especially in areas such as terrorist recruitment, incitement to terrorism, terrorism financing, and terrorist training.

Currently, counter-terrorism is often seen as war and has focused mainly on military force, law enforcement measures, and intelligence operations.

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<sup>20</sup> Idowu, A.A (2013): Security Laws and Challenges in Nigeria: The Boko Haram Insurgency, *Journal of Applied Security Research*, 8:1, 118-134

<sup>21</sup> ECOWAS, (2013), op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> UNODC, (2015), UNODC launches new global initiative to boost criminal justice responses to foreign terrorist

fighters, March 25. Available at <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2015/March/unodc-launches-new-global-initiative-to-boost-criminal-justice-responses-to-foreign-terrorist-fighters.html>. [Accessed on 15 April 2015].



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For instance, even though Nigeria has been reluctant to allow an international force on its territory, the military offensive undertaken by Nigerian, Nigerien, Chadian and Cameroonian security forces recorded some positive results against Boko Haram in the run-up to Nigeria's 2015 elections. However, the key challenge is the sustainability of such operations and continued collaboration among these countries to curb the threat of Boko Haram. Moreover, Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Cameroon and Benin have come out with a plan for a Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to fight Boko Haram. This plan has been approved by the African Union. The plan is yet to be implemented, but questions arise as to the chances of the proposed 8,700-strong regional force against Boko Haram. While the modalities (such as zones of deployment) are yet to be clearly outlined, issues of mistrust among the countries also make cross-border operations very unlikely. Currently, Chad, Cameroon and Niger are all working mainly on their sides of the border with Nigeria to halt attacks by Boko Haram.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, there is a low level of collaboration among the military, law enforcement officers, forensic experts, investigators and court officials. In several instances, evidence is destroyed in the course of military operations. This poses challenges for threat evaluation and identification of key evidence by forensic experts for investigation and prosecution. There is also lack of capacity in the judicial system of most countries in West Africa to deal with crimes of terrorism. Moreover, the unintended consequences of heavy-handed counter-terrorism operations such as human rights abuses undermine the efforts by governments to curtail the spate of terrorism. Human rights infringements meted out to individuals belonging to 'fringe

groups' could arguably provide impetus for more terrorism as such individuals find the reasons and motivation to stand up against the status quo.<sup>24</sup> For instance, the Nigerian military has been accused of gross human rights violations including intimidation, arbitrary arrest, torture and harassment of suspected Boko Haram members and innocent civilians.<sup>25</sup> While these allegations are yet to be verified, a history of military brutality makes them pressing concerns for Nigeria.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The fight against the growing menace of terrorism thus requires a broad range of policy responses to address the underlying conditions conducive to its spread. The ECOWAS Strategy may not provide a complete answer to the problem of terrorism in West Africa, but it nonetheless establishes a proactive framework for dealing with the threat of terrorism and thus requires effective implementation.

- There is a need for enhanced cooperation between regional and international partners to achieve practical and coherent results through the effective implementation of the ECOWAS Strategy at both national and regional levels.
- Governments must show strong commitment towards operationalizing national counter-terrorism measures by providing the needed financial, human and technical resources.
- West African countries should deepen their collaboration in critical areas of intelligence and information-sharing.
- ECOWAS and its member states should work with institutions such as the Kofi Annan

<sup>23</sup> BBC News (2015), Boko Haram fight hampered by poor Chad-Nigeria co-ordination, May 12. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32703833>. [Accessed on 13 May 2015].

<sup>24</sup> Myjoyonline.com (2014). Security alert: Ghanaian lone wolves recruited into Boko Haram. 10 December. Available

at: <http://www.myjoyonline.com>. [Accessed on 11 December 2014].

<sup>25</sup> Amnesty International, (2014). Nigeria: Gruesome footage implicates military in war crimes. 5 August. Available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/nigeria>. [Accessed on 2 September 2014].

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International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) and other training centres of excellence to provide empirical analysis on terrorism and training to strengthen the capacity of personnel.

- The capacity of law enforcement and criminal justice officials in the region should be enhanced through targeted training to enforce counter-terrorism measures in accordance with the rule of law and respect for human rights.
- West African states should improve their capacities in anti-terrorism legislation drafting and training law enforcement and criminal justice officials in the investigation and prosecution of terrorism.
- Member states should engage relevant non-governmental actors such as civil society organizations, local communities, and faith-based groups in developing conflict-prevention strategies to deal with violent extremist narratives that often lead to terrorist acts.

### About the Author

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