

## ECOWAS Counter Terrorism Strategy Implementation Plan Report

March 2016

### *March Highlights*

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its affiliates struck new grounds in Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast and Niger. On a single day, AQIM and Boko Haram attacked separate targets in Niger. Since the attacks on the Radisson Blue Hotel in Bamako and the Splendid Hotel Ouagadougou, many countries in West Africa and the Sahel belt continue to increase military presence in public places to avert likely attacks. Unfortunately, this did not deter an attack on beach-goers in Grand Bassam, Côte d'Ivoire, about 40km (25 miles) south of Abidjan.

Violent extremist attacks have continued on a near daily basis in volatile areas in Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Mali and Burkina Faso. Amidst tight security, gunmen attacked a European Union Training Mission (EUTM) headquarters in Bamako, Mali during which one of the suspects was killed while two were arrested.<sup>1</sup> Three policemen were reportedly killed in Burkina Faso near the border with Mali by AQIM affiliates. Many border communities along Nigeria's border with Cameroon, Niger and Chad have been under constant pressure from Boko Haram attacks too often unhindered by military or police forces.

The 8,700-strong Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), created in June 2015 to man the stretch of the borders of Nigeria and neighbouring countries, has so far been largely ineffective as traditional challenge of cooperation among African countries have hampered the force's progress, particularly in the sharing of intelligence. While the United States has drone bases in Niger and Cameroon assisting with intelligence gathering, the ability of the MNJTF to receive timely and actionable intelligence is wanting. Additionally, joint operations between different countries of the MNJTF are lacking, allowing Boko Haram to cross international borders virtually unhindered. Factors hindering MNJTF progress include lack of resource, poor coordination, political corruption and the inability of leaders to agree on a joint strategy.

The battle to rid the region of violent extremism continues. While military operations continue to dominate government approaches to deal with threats, reports of jihadist group expansion into new territories are rampant. For instance, Senegal intercepted some of its citizens traveling through Mauritania attempting to join Boko Haram, Nigeria arrested an Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) recruiter and an arms supply from Libya was intercepted in Nigeria. Occasional Boko Haram attacks continue in Borno and Adamawa in Nigeria and in neighbouring Chad, Niger, Cameroon and Mali despite increased military pressures. While French forces continued their

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<sup>1</sup> EU military training mission attacked in Mali capital <https://www.rt.com/news/336491-mali-eu-base-gunmen/>

fight against AQIM, ambush attack on Mali government forces, aid workers and UN mission peacekeepers remain a daily threat.

### **State Pursuit by Violent Extremists**

Violent extremists continue to exploit political, economic and social marginalisation, weak state governance and ungoverned spaces, unemployment and poverty, ignorance and illiteracy, weak community cohesion and resilience, tribal differences, and land disputes to find refuge and new recruits. Each of these factors contribute to the growth of extremism in the region. While violent extremist groups might share some common traits and grievances, it must be kept in mind that people join these groups for reasons that fall across a large spectrum. Addressing each of these reasons will be critical in our countering violent extremism narrative.

Boko Haram's attempt to create an Islamic caliphate in Nigeria has failed. Military pressures and civilian resistance to Boko Haram's violent techniques have largely isolate the group from the very population they were attempting to control. However, small pockets of safe haven for Boko Haram continue in northern Nigeria and Cameroon. Addressing these safe havens and the civilians that occupy them in a humane way will be vital to ending Boko Haram and the conditions that produced the group.

### **Operations**

Boko Haram continues to use landmines to slow military and police operations, particularly during an active attack. While Boko Haram attacks on military bases have abated in Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon, AQIM has increased the frequency of their attacks on military and police targets in Mali with attacks on an EU base, a UN peacekeeping base, and multiple military and police checkpoints.

Suicide bomb attacks were also very prominent in Boko Haram operational zones. Women and girls are still being used for suicide bomb attacks in Cameroon and Nigeria, targeting IDP camps, markets, churches, mosques and other soft targets.

### **Government Response**

Globally, approaches to dealing with violent extremism are still evolving. Killing as the primary means of defeating violent extremism is clearly not working; more must be done to counter the conditions that lead to it. Many violent extremist group leaders and operatives, including those of Boko Haram and Ansar Dine, have been killed or arrested, but attacks have not stopped. Government response to terrorism has largely been hinged on military might rather than on tackling the root causes of terrorism. For instance, since the attack in Côte d'Ivoire, government has responded by increasing military presence in civil areas. However, leaders must realize that

increased military presence is not sustainable in the long run. More holistic approaches to countering violent extremism are required.

Peul activists, notably through the Tabital Pulaaku organisation, have complained of human rights abuses by both government and Tuareg rebel forces during and after past rebellions. Military heavy handedness has in many cases driven citizens into the hands of criminal gangs, militias and religious violent extremist in Northern Mali. Rampant human rights violations perpetrated by military forces in the Sahel are well reported by Amnesty International. Often, human rights violations are a result of soldier and peacekeepers who are afraid for their lives and react violently to perceived threats. However in many cases these violations are the result of untrained soldiers or simply for personal gain, including rape, unlawful detention, forceful disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

There are several multinational groups that have emerged in West Africa and the Sahel over time to tackle extremist groups but have so far been largely ineffective. In December 2014, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger formed the G5 Sahel grouping, an institutional framework created to coordinate development and security policies of the region. Other groups include the U.S.'s Africa Command (AFRICOM) and Trans Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership and France's counter-terrorism task force in the Sahel region, which allows for surveillance missions and "small team engagements with partner nations," France's "Operation Barkhane," and the UN peacekeeping force, MINUSMA. However, cooperation amongst these groups is lacking and has put into question the efficacy of the ECOWAS and AU. The handing over of regional and national sovereignty to Western allies is worrisome as it may be used by violent extremist groups as rationale for their attacks. Additionally, contractor involvement in West African and Sahel conflicts is another growing issue, as paying mercenaries to do the bidding of our governments could also be perceived as Western encroachment into African affairs.

Community cohesion and resilience is pivotal to preventing violent extremism. Violent extremists operate and thrive in communities where there is lack of resilience and unity; cohesive communities can fight off the threats of violent extremism and deny their fighters safe haven. The present African states structure has largely ignored community roles in the fight against terrorism. Growing divisions in communities across the region have made it possible for criminal gangs to thrive and for violent extremists to reign.

## **Humanitarian Issues**

According to United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), an estimated 23.5 million people in the Sahel, amounting to almost one in six persons in 2016, will not have enough to eat, and at least 6 million of those require emergency intervention. The present of humanitarian condition in the Sahel reflects the level of abject poverty, rapid

population growth, climate change, and armed conflicts and violence across the region.<sup>2</sup> Violent extremism is one of the leading causes of the deteriorating humanitarian crisis unfolding in Nigeria. Food crisis has reached a chronic level in the Lake Chad region, where over 4.45 million people face severe food insecurity from ongoing violence by Boko Haram.

A record number of people are in need of emergency relief in the Lake Chad Basin region. According to a report by the ECOWAS Counter Terrorism Tracker,<sup>3</sup> an estimated 2.5 million people—including 2 million Nigerians and half of which are estimated to be children—have been displaced by the conflict with Boko Haram. The large majority of displaced have sought refuge with host communities, placing an unsustainable strain on already meagre resources. Those unable to find host families have been forced into government-run IDP camps that have been widely reported to have horrible living conditions, are greatly under-resourced and are lucrative targets for Boko Haram attacks. Human rights violations, including women forced to provide sex to guards for food, have also been reported.

The situation in Mali continues to be of concern with persisting insecurity, and some 200,000 Malians remaining displaced. Cameroon and Chad both host over 300,000 refugees each, most of which in already extremely vulnerable areas.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Strategy*

In view of these challenges, the ECOWAS CTSIP fills the gap for the need of robust and proactive policy recommendations address the security issues of terrorism within the region. The ECOWAS CTSSIP calls on states to develop de-radicalisation programs that seek to counter radical ideologies and terrorist propaganda and social awareness programs for youth groups. Counterterrorism programs should also be incorporated into school curriculums.

The CTSIP is built on the primacy of terrorism prevention and respect for human rights. Our strategy emphasizes good governance and a democratic culture as prerequisites for effective counter-terrorism. Counter-terrorism requires both military and non-military strategies and tools, however CTSIP observes that the largest percentage of efforts usually lean toward military means. Cooperation among states and technical assistance in all fields constitute a cornerstone for the successful implementation of this strategy.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unocha.org/sahel/about-sahel>

<sup>3</sup> The ECOWAS Tracker ([www.ecowascounterterrorism.org](http://www.ecowascounterterrorism.org)) is an online tracker that documents terrorist incidences, government responses, humanitarian issues and regional and international collaboration towards resolving the threat of violent extremism.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.unocha.org/sahel/about-sahel>

The three pillars of the ECOWAS CTSIP strategy are: prevention, rescue and reconstruct. Prevention seeks to mitigate the conditions that lead to terrorism while also seeking to ensure timely and effective responses to terrorist acts. Rescue.... Reconstruct seeks to rebuild society and reassert the authority of the state after a terrorist attack.

### *Conclusion*

Violent extremist groups pose a serious threat to international peace, security and stability and constitute a criminal act that undermines efforts aimed at achieving democracy, good governance and development. The challenges posed by violent extreme groups have further impoverished many people and created dire humanitarian crisis. The reversal of democratic and development gains of previous decades<sup>5</sup> is a result of the chaos caused by these elements.

Terrorism is a major global problem. States in the Sahel and ECOWAS have proven to be weak against political corruption, poverty, social injustice and governance in remote areas. Large areas left ungoverned by states are now controlled by terrorist elements, insurgent groups and criminal gangs. While some groups like Boko Haram have evolved locally, other groups use West Africa as a base of operations and spread their terror to other parts of Africa.

There is a desperate need to increase state response that addresses these threats using a holistic approach. The unfortunate inability of the region to form a common alliance against crime and terrorism has made the region a common ground for breeding criminals and terrorist organizations.

### *Recommendations*

- African countries must think beyond their individual country's security and think holistically about areas of influence outside their borders. African leaders must meet and address these grey areas and develop joint counterterrorism strategies.
- Porous borders and state-within-state spaces not governed by a legitimate central government must be collectively addressed through a continent-wide strategy.
- Transparency of the state and its institutions is essential. There is need to operate an open policy with consistent interface with civil society and the media as a measure of galvanizing national support.
- ECOWAS states need to share actionable intelligence and information. Cooperation in investigation, prosecution and counterterrorism operations is essential to defeating violent extremist groups in the region.

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<sup>5</sup> Banfield J. Tell (2015) Like It Is the role of civil society in responding to serious and organised crime in west Africa, International Alert, September 2015

- Those who have been displaced need to be provided with psychological, mental, physical and emotional support before they are returned to their communities. Governments need to guarantee their safety, ensure rebuilding of their community, houses, markets, roads/bridges before they are returned to their respective communities.