



Addressing Challenges in West African States African Initiatives Countering Violent Extremism

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Interrelationships between extremist groups, politically and militarily influential entities, and the local population of the Sahel Region and West African countries led to more violent extremism in the region. The relationship between al-Qaeda and Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) in Mali and the Independent Nasserite Movement (INM) resulted in a noticeable increase in terrorist attacks in some Sahel countries, such as Burkina Faso and Mali. Poor border surveillance, inadequate intelligence, increasing security issues, widespread youth problems, and increasing rates of poverty and unemployment have all enhanced the risks of the free mobilization of extremist groups and more extremism in neighboring Sahel countries, such as Ghana, Togo, and Benin. This calls for joint regional and national efforts to fight the rising terrorism and to address the deeply-seated causes of violent extremism in the region.

Roots of Extremism

In the wake of the Libyan crisis and the murder of former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, thousands of armed refugees, particularly Tuareg tribe members, returned to their home countries carrying large ordnance. Given their constant aspiration for self-autonomy, Tuareg rebels in Mali launched an armed attack in 2012 upon the central government that peaked in the March 2012 coup d'état and the murder of Mali President Amadou Toumani Touré .

Such events instigated the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) which started a new era of turmoil, declaring MNLA in northern Mali an independent state. Fierce battles raged between MNLA and its allies affiliated to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), in addition to the prevalence of the extremist Islamic Front in the Sahel Region. Violent attacks perpetrated by AQIM have increased, as well as those perpetrated by Ansar al-Dine and Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa

(MUJAO) in Northern Mali. The crisis extended to Central Mali by late 2013, then relocated to Niger and Burkina Faso in 2016 .

Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM)

Observers suggest that JNIM was founded in March 2017 as a reaction to the attacks by joint international, regional, and national forces, such as Operation Barkhane in the Sahel Region. Four groups integrated: Ansar al-Dine, Katiba Macina, al-Murabitoun, and the Sahara branch of AQIM. Launching JNIM, Emir Iyad Ag Ghali, a Tuareg leader, swore allegiance to al-Qaeda Leader Ayman al-Zawahiri .

The foundation of JNIM ostensibly represents the overcoming of ethnic and social barriers in favor of transnational extremism, given how it includes different ethnicities. While JNIM seeks to expand its activities outside of Mali, the Macina Liberation Front led by Amadou Koufa carried out a series of violent attacks in Burkina Faso. Despite the emergence of local branches of such groups, their constant changes, and consecutive threats posed by groups along the North Sahel Region, West Africa, particularly in Benin, Ghana, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire, these groups extensively continued their subversive operations, with no drop in their capacities.

In May 2019, two French tourists and their local tour guide were abducted in Pendjari National Park in Benin; four customs officers were killed in Eastern Burkina Faso near the Togolese borders; Spanish priest Antonio César Fernández was assassinated in an attack near Togo-Burkina Faso borders. These events uncover how such groups aspire to expand their activities to new regions, such as West African Sahel countries.

Asserting Power

The military attack by joint forces undermined the capacities of extremist groups in Western Africa and parts of the Sahel Region. However, several indications emphasize the capacity of such groups to adapt, maneuver, survive, expand, and assert their power. This resulted in renewed attacks by IS in Nigeria, the emergence of Boko Haram dissident group, constant attacks by terrorist groups in Mali and Burkina Faso, and more violence in North-West Africa. Meanwhile, it is important to look into the way these armed groups manage to thrive. How do they assert their dominance in new territories? How do they get help from the community?

These groups, particularly Macina Liberation Front and Ansar al-Dine, took advantage of local injustices to create narratives of the exclusion and injustices experienced by

citizens, seeking to recruit them. For example, Ibrahim Dicko, an advocate for violent extremism in Burkina Faso, created a narrative of the violent methods adopted by security forces while hunting extremists in Soum Province and the injustices experienced by some people there. Such narratives have resulted in increased extremism, especially among young people, and fostered empathy and public support towards such groups in their zones of influence. Besides, they have scaled up polarization and resources, legitimized their acts, and supported other fundamentalist groups affiliated to global Salafist movements, which further highlighted their atrocious acts and created a fragile environment of growing violence.

Weak Governance

Most security institutions in the region suffer significantly and have become incapable of protecting their regional borders. This made the region a perfect environment for groups seeking to play a role within political circles. Moreover, fragile borders have contributed to mercenary mobilization, arms trafficking, the dissemination of extremist approaches, abductions, and robberies. Border areas unprotected with adequate patrols have helped, too, to provide a vast shelter for such groups, from which they could dominate local communities.

Given the loose security grip in border areas of South West Africa, radical groups make use of peripheral areas as financing sources for their terrorist acts and extremist goals. The commerce and migration route links West Africa with parts of the Sahel Region, Burkina Faso, Northern Ghana, and Northern Togo, and serves as an arms-trafficking route. Extremist groups take Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo as sources of financing and support services. Besides, income generated by arms trade, robberies, abductions, illicit trade of arms is utilized to purchase fuel, motorcycles, food, training fighters and recruiting new members.

Overcoming Challenges

West African countries started a number of initiatives aiming to overcome regional security challenges resulting from violent extremism. Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo started the Accra Initiative on September 14, 2017 to address the lack of security in the region, and to create a single entity that would coordinate cooperation between South-West African countries to overcome security challenges. The Accra Initiative is based on three pillars: information exchange, training security and intelligence personnel, and the conduct of joint cross-border military operations.

This initiative aims at fighting organized criminal activities in border areas, the cooperation of Member Countries in dismantling terrorist networks, preventing their proliferation, impeding terrorists seeking political asylum, and combatting violent extremism .

Three main operations named (Koudanlgou) were conducted regionally within the framework of the initiative. Within May and November 2018, Operation Koudanlgou I and Operation Koudanlgou II were conducted jointly by Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Togo in border areas, then Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana respectively. On November 19, Ghana and Togo embarked on the joint security Operation Koudanlgou III, aiming to prevent terrorist activities, illegal extraction of natural resources, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and other transnational crimes. This operation resulted in 170 arrests of terrorists and suspects .

In May 2020, the joint Operation Comoé was launched by Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, resulting in 38 arrests of terrorist suspects, 24 in Burkina Faso and 14 in Côte d'Ivoire. This operation managed to destroy a terrorist base in Alidugu, and confiscated arms, ammunition, memory chips, and mobile phones .

Trust-Building

Security efforts made by Sahel countries in combatting violent extremism resulted in trust-building between Member Countries, and addressed concerns and doubts, which fostered information and intelligence exchange, and reinforced constructive cooperation to counter violent extremism. Despite the successes achieved, challenges still persist since the military operations conducted were improvised, temporary, and limited in scope. This means that terrorist groups remained capable of regrouping and conducting more deadly attacks.

Nationally, a number of counter-terrorism operations were conducted in Sahel countries. On March 7, 2019, Burkina Faso launched Operation Otapuanu, which dismantled bases of some groups and undermined their threats. Ghana launched Operation Grip and Operation Claw-Eagle to address border security breaches, and train security personnel on carrying out their mandated tasks. On January 5, 2017, Operation Dump was officially code-named Coordinated Concept in March 2020 .

Excessive counter-terrorism military and security measures would not necessarily address all kinds of exclusion such as political, economic, and social exclusion which heightened people's sense of injustice. This has been exploited by extremist groups to

propagate their terrorist plans in those countries. Human rights violations and illegal killings of suspect extremist group members by security forces should be stopped in order to prevent the lack of trust in governments and cut off the support received by those groups.