



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

Report

"Terrorism" and Transnational Organised Crime in West Africa



*Dr. Freedom C. Onuoha and Dr. Gerald E. Ezirim**
24 June 2013



People walk pass burning dead bodies and tires in a street in Onitsha, Nigeria, Thursday, Feb. 23, 2006 [AP Photo/George Osodi]

Introduction

Across the world, the existence of militant groups, organised criminal gangs and the nexus between them is not a new phenomenon. In recent times, however, their manifestation and intricate linkages in Africa have become growing sources of concern at national, regional and international levels. In West Africa in particular, "terrorist" footprints are increasing 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 Jama'atu Ansarul Musilimina Fi Biladis Sudan (Ansaru) in addition to other sleeper militant networks. Further complicating the security landscape is the increase in the outbreak of transnational organised crime (TOC) that feed into the so-called terrorist loop in West Africa. This article highlights the threat of terrorism and TOC in West Africa, focusing on how some TOC directly feeds into the evolving threat of terrorism in the region. It recommends measures that could contribute to the suppression of the growth of terrorism and TOC in the region.

Epistemic Orientation

As definitions continue to proliferate about the concepts of terrorism and TOC, clarifications become necessary to enhance the understanding of their meanings and linkages. In this report, terrorism is defined as the premeditated use or threat of use of violence by an individual or group to cause fear, destruction or death, especially against

unarmed targets, property or infrastructure in a state, intended to compel those in authority to respond to the demands and expectations of the individual or group behind such violent acts. Their demands or expectations may be for a change in status quo in terms of the political, economic, ideological, religious or social order within the affected state, or for a change in the (in)actions or policies of the affected state in relation to its interaction with (an)other group(s) or states.

There are many ways in which TOC can be and has been defined. However, its usage in this report suggests that transnational organised crime (TOC) refers to “crimes that are not only international (crimes that cross borders between countries), but crimes that by their nature involve border crossings as an essential part of the criminal activity. They also include crimes that take place in one country, but their consequences significantly affect another country”(1). The implication therefore is that TOC “by definition involves people in more than one country maintaining a system of operation and communication that is effective enough to perform criminal transactions, sometimes repeatedly”(2).

Understanding West Africa

West Africa is a highly complex region caught between affluence and affliction. The region is made up of 16 states: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. Apart from Mauritania, the remaining states are members of the regional Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) formed in 1975. The region’s states vary in territorial size, colonial history, economic strength, internal cohesion, and external linkages(3). They also differ in terms of population size, levels of development, stages of state building, and nature of resource endowments. They are confronted with different levels of security, governance and development challenges that have made them poor despite being greatly endowed with natural resources.

Although West African states gained political independence before any other region in colonial Africa, they have failed to achieve a high degree of political stability due to corruption, weak or failed governance institutions, conflicts and porous borders among others. Overall, they all share a common feature of multiple layers of insecurity, associated with conflicts and crime at community and national levels, often across borders and with regional ramifications(4). Threats like terrorism, drug trafficking, illegal oil bunkering, piracy, and arms trafficking have acquired worrisome transnational dimension in recent times(5). Consequently, terrorism and TOC have emerged as formidable threats to human security and is now taking on a singular importance in terms of national, regional and international engagements.

Overview of Militancy in West Africa

The threat posed to security, stability and development by terrorism is not new in Africa in general. However, it was not until few years after the 9/11 attacks in the United States that the issue of the vulnerability of West Africa to domestic and transnational terrorism assumed centre stage in policy and academic debates. Notwithstanding that Algeria-based Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) had first set foot in northern Mali in 2003 and began forging ties with the local population (through marriage and protection of smuggling routes), there was a collective security nescience concerning the growing vulnerability of West Africa to domestic and transnational terrorism.

As of 2006, the debate centred on whether terrorism was a real, emerging or imagined threat in West Africa(6). The situation has changed dramatically in the last few years. In fact, the rising number of attacks, the multiplicity of active terror networks and the growing links between and among these groups have transformed the threat of terrorism from imagined or emerging to a real security challenge in West Africa.

At the core of this is the attacks AQIM has mounted on West Africa as well as the tactical, weapons and ideological support it extends to groups such as Ansar Dine, Ansaru, Boko Haram, and alongside other sleeper cells dotting the region. Countries such as Niger, Nigeria, Mali and Mauritania have witnessed new outbreaks or escalation of attacks. Groups hitherto considered as domestic groups, such as Boko Haram and MUJAO, have successfully launched transnational attacks or struck at international targets, thereby fundamentally changing their prior description and designation.

AQIM and sleeper cells affiliated with it are behind several cases of kidnapping and the murder of Western tourists, aid workers, and soldiers, as well as attacks on government targets, security posts, and foreign diplomatic missions such as in Mauritania. In July 2011, AQIM attacked a military base in Bassiknou, near Nema, in southeastern Mauritania. AQIM's ties with Mali Islamists have equally emboldened such groups to mount audacious attacks. Mali slipped into instability after the March 2012 coup that created a power vacuum enabling predominantly the Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), backed by a patchwork of Islamist forces – Ansar Dine, AQIM, and MUJAO – to take control of nearly two-thirds of the country. The MUJAO has since then mounted audacious attacks.

An offshoot of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, MUJAO is believed to maintain good relations with the Sahrawis (natives of the Western Sahara) and the Polisario Front. It has grown in reach and sophistication since October 2011 when it became active,

carrying out some deadly attacks in northern Mali. It has claimed responsibility for attacks like the 5 April 2012 abduction of seven Algerian diplomats in Gao, Mali.

The intervention of French forces in the Mali crisis has seen these groups re-strategise in two principal ways. First was retreat into the mountainous region of northern Mali and second was the adoption of hitherto tactics such as suicide bombings and guerrilla attacks. On 8 February 2013, Mali witnessed its first suicide bombing when an attacker blew himself up in the chief city of Gao. Two days later, a second suicide attack rocked a military checkpoint at the city's entrance. Between 9 February and 22 May 2013, Mali experienced twelve suicide attacks(7). The MUJAO has also expanded their attacks into neighbouring countries, demonstrated by the 23 May 2013 twin suicide bombing in Niger. No fewer than 26, mostly Nigerien soldiers, were killed and about 30 injured(8).

The growing audacity of the Nigerian Boko Haram is one among many developments that have made West Africa a region of growing terror concern. Following an anti-government revolt it waged in July 2009 that attracted worldwide attention, Boko Haram members have escalated attacks targeting mainly security and law enforcement agents in addition to civilians, public infrastructure, community or religious leaders, places of worship, markets, and media houses among others. Its tactics include use of improvised explosive devices, targeted assassinations, drive-by shootings and suicide bombings. The Boko Haram attacks are estimated to have cost more than 6000 lives since 2009, including deaths caused by the security forces. The 26 August 2011 bombing of the United Nations headquarters in Abuja that killed 23 people was devastating evidence that the group aims to internationalise its acts of terror(9).

The rise of Ansaru adds another dimension to the landscape of terrorism unfolding in West Africa. Ansaru, an abridgement of a name that roughly translates as "Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa," is less well known than the Boko Haram. Since its emergence, however, Ansaru has claimed responsibility for various acts of terrorism in Nigeria such as the November 2012 armed attack on a detention facility in Abuja; the January 2013 ambushing of Mali-bound Nigerian soldiers at Kogi State, and the February 2013 kidnapping of seven foreign expatriates in Bauchi State. The 9 March 2013 murder of the seven kidnapped expatriates remains the biggest of its kind since the outbreak of violence in northern Nigeria.

Beyond the threats posed by AQIM, Ansar Dine, Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, Boko Haram, Ansaru, and other sleeper cells in West Africa, the gradual infiltration and expansion of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Hezbollah into West Africa are emerging concerns. The arrest and indictment of two Nigerians for

accepting thousands of dollars from AQAP to recruit potential members from Nigeria suggests that Al-Qaeda's most aggressive affiliate is seeking to boost its presence in West Africa(10). Similarly, terror scouts are helping Hezbollah – the Lebanon-based military organisation – with fundraising and recruiting in Sierra Leone, Senegal, Ivory Coast and Gambia. Most of these groups generate funds for their operations through the facilitation of TOC.

TOC and Links to Militancy in West Africa

Quite a lot of TOC pervades the West African region including drug trafficking, natural resource smuggling, forgery, cigarette smuggling, arms trafficking, money laundering, and maritime piracy, among others. Small arms and light weapons (SALWs) trafficking is increasingly undermining peace and security in West Africa. Out of approximately 500 million illicit weapons in circulation worldwide in 2004, it was estimated that about 100 million were in sub-Saharan Africa, with eight to ten million concentrated in the West African sub-region(11). Traffickers constitute West African nationals and their foreign collaborators.

Given ineffectual national security systems, porous borders, and growing demand for arms by criminals and militants, cartels specialising in arms trafficking have devised methods for concealing and conveniently trafficking arms across borders in West Africa. The audacity of militants operating in West Africa grew with the proliferation of weapons in the Sahara-Sahel region following the destabilisation of Libya. Libyan arms first obtained by AQIM and other mercenaries have been transferred to groups such as Ansar Dine, Boko Haram and MUJAO, emboldening and enabling them to mount more deadly attacks.

With sophisticated weapons in their hands, militants have been able to abduct persons for ransom. By kidnapping Westerners in the region, AQIM fetched an estimated \$70 million in ransom payments between 2006 and 2011(12). AQIM has also assisted Nigerian affiliates, Jama'atu Ansarul Musilimina Fi Biladis Sudan (Ansaru) and Boko Haram, to carry out kidnappings, thus adding a complex dimension to the funding of militant operations. Boko Haram for instance kidnapped a French family of seven in Cameroon on 19 February 2013, transported them to Nigeria, and freed them on 18 April 2013 after allegedly collecting \$3.15 million as ransom.

AQIM and Boko Haram had equally relied on bank robbery to generate funds for their sustenance and operations. The attacks of Boko Haram explain the sharp rise in bank robbery in Nigeria in recent years. In 2011 alone, about 100 bank installations were attacked, and over 30 of these were attributed to Boko Haram(13).

Oil theft in Nigeria is another organised crime that could be a potential source of terrorism financing. While neglected by security and intelligence operatives, theft of crude oil or petroleum products could be a funding stream for individuals and criminal gangs with connections to militant groups. For instance, it was reported that the escape of Kabiru Sokoto (a Boko Haram commander) from police custody in January 2013 in Abaji, a suburb of Abuja, was facilitated by an army of youths, who “are also believed to be responsible for the breaking of oil pipelines in the area”(14).

Also related to this is the escalating threat of maritime piracy off the coast of West Africa. There is growing speculation of a possible link between piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and the financing of regional Islamist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine, MUJAO, Boko Haram among others(15). Some of the millions paid to the oil gangs are thought to have made their way to Islamist rebels linked to Al-Qaeda in northern Nigeria(16).

Furthermore, West Africa’s drug smuggling routes provide opportunities for militant organisations to generate funds. West Africa is now a major transit hub and destination of drugs coming from Latin America and sometimes destined for Europe and America. Transportation is done by land, air and sea. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) claims that cocaine seizures in West Africa peaked in 2007 with 47 tons netted. At least fifty tons of cocaine (worth \$2 billion) transit through West Africa per year, with about one ton slipping through the “narco-state” of Guinea-Bissau. The arrest of a former Chief of the Guinea-Bissau Navy, Rear-Admiral Jose Americo Bubo Na Tchuto, by the US Drug Enforcement Agency for drug trafficking as well as the seizure by UK Border Force officials of cocaine worth over £17 million at the Port of Tilbury in Essex, both in April 2013, signpost a dangerous trend.

Other forms of transnational criminal activity that originate from, transit through or destined for West Africa include cigarette smuggling, human trafficking/smuggling (including illegal migration) and counterfeit medicine. Money laundering is also a major challenge in the region due to corruption, weak governance and deficient rule of law institutions. Together with other factors like poverty and widespread unemployment, these trafficking flows contribute to instability as well as sustain terrorism in the region.

Towards Suppressing Militancy and Transnational Organised Crime in West Africa

The imperative of addressing security challenges has inspired the adoption of several regional mechanisms and instruments for enhancing security, development, good governance and conflict management in the region. Some of these instruments aiming to collectively suppress these challenges include the Protocol on Non-Aggression (1978) and Mutual Assistance in Defence (1981); the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (1999); the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (December 2001); the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials (June 2006); and the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (2008). Of note was the recent adoption of the Political Declaration and Common Position against Terrorism, which provides for the regional Counter Terrorism Strategy and Implementation Plan to help member states combat terrorism. In spite of these interventions, terrorism pervades West Africa. Its manifestation could increase in scale if urgent steps are not taken to arrest the trend.

The challenge therefore has not been the regional lack of frameworks and instruments to respond to these threats, but rather the failure to address the underlying factors contributing to the outbreak of these crimes as well as the complex linkages between them. In order to deal effectively with the threats of terrorism and TOC, there must be a broad approach that integrates efforts at the national (member states) and regional (ECOWAS) levels into a robust strategy, focusing on improving governance, development and security in the region. The following is recommended:

Governance

- ❖ The strengthening of all institutions and processes that promote efficiency, accountability and transparency in the management of national resources across West Africa;
- ❖ The creation and strengthening of institutions that promote the rule of law, enforce sanctions for human rights violations and diligently prosecute criminals and militants;
- ❖ The broadening and democratisation of the political space to accommodate people and groups that have been marginalised along ethnic, religious or racial lines.

Development

- ❖ Robust partnership between governments and the private sector to initiate and sustain functional microcredit schemes for the poor, especially the unemployed youths;
- ❖ Implementation of targeted development interventions in border communities to earn their goodwill so as to support governments' efforts at combating TOCs facilitated across borders;
- ❖ Implementation of a region-wide security consciousness and awareness programme for people;
- ❖ Evolution of broad-based strategic communication or information operations strategy to counter growing extremism and jihadist narrative radicalising the minds of impressionable youths.

Security

- ❖ Establishment of a Regional Intelligence Fusion Centre (RIFC) for warehousing intelligence and information on militant activities to inform proactive responses;
- ❖ Initiation partnership with Central and North African states to develop a robust tri-regional mechanism combating the flow of drug, arms, weapons, explosives and fighters in the Sahara-Sahel region;
- ❖ Reform and professionalisation of state security forces to ensure they effectively respect and protect human rights, including during counter terrorism operations.

^{*}Dr. Freedom C. Onuoha is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Strategic Research and Studies, National Defence College, Abuja, Nigeria; and Dr. Gerald E. Ezirim, Lecturer, Department of Political Science, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

¹Awanbor, F.E. (2009), "The Challenges of Transnational Crime to Nigeria's Diplomacy", in OA Onafowokan and OD Oche (eds.) *Transnational Crime and Security in West Africa*. Lagos: Foreign Service Academy; Ezirim, G. (2010), *Transnational Organized Crimes and West African States: A Focus on Nigeria's External Relations, 1989-2006*. Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing.

²UNODC (2005), *Transnational Organised Crime in the West African Region* (New York: United Nations).

³Rönnbäck, A. (2008), "ECOWAS and West Africa's Future – Problems or Possibilities?" *Umeå Working Papers in Political Science*, No. 3, p.12

⁴Bryden, A., N'Diaye, B., and Olonisakin, F. (2008), "Understanding the Challenges of Security Sector Governance in West Africa," in Alan Bryden, Boubacar N'Diaye and Funmi Olonisakin (eds.) *Challenges for Security Sector Governance in West Africa*. LIT Verlag: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces.

⁵Ezirim, G. (2010), *Transnational Organized Crimes and West African States: A Focus on Nigeria's External Relations, 1989-2006*. Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing.

⁶Obi, C. (2006), "Terrorism in West Africa: Real, Emerging or Imagined Threats," *Africa Security Review*, 15(3):87-101.

⁷Atallah, R. (2013), "Crisis in the Sahel: Mali Terrorism Threat Growing," 23 May, http://www.acus.org/new_atlanticist/crisis-sahel-mali-terrorism-threat-growing?utm_source=Africa+Center+for+Strategic+Studies+-+Media+Review+for+May+24%2C+2013&utm_campaign=5%2F24%2F2013&utm_medium=email

⁸Alechenu, J., Soriwei, F., and Baiyewu, L. (2013) "New terror group emerges," *The Punch*, 26 May, p.2.

⁹Onuoha, F.C. (2012), "Boko Haram's Tactical Evolution," *African Defence Forum*, 4(4):33.

¹⁰The Punch (2012), "FG arraigns two suspected Nigerian members of Al-Qaeda," 6 July, <http://www.punchng.com/news/fg-arraigns-two-suspected-nigerian-members-of-al-qaeda/>.

¹¹Bah, Alhaji (2004), "Micro-disarmament in West Africa: The ECOWAS Moratorium on Small Arms and Light Weapons." *African Security Review*, 13(3).

¹²Foster-Bowser, E. and Sanders, A (2012), "Security Threats in the Sahel and Beyond: AQIM, Boko Haram and al Shabaab," http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_Report_3818.pdf.

¹³Thisday (2011), "Boko Haram, armed robbers attack 100 bank branches," 10 December, p.6.

¹⁴Suleiman, T. (2012), "Boko Haram Siege Deepens," Tell, 6 February, p.50.

¹⁵Israeli Homeland Security, (2013) "Fighting Piracy in Africa – too little too late," Defence Update, 6 May, http://defense-update.com/20130506_fighting-piracy-in-africa-too-little-too-late.html?utm_source=Africa+Center+for+Strategic+Studies+Media+Review+for+May+7%2C+2013&utm_campaign=5%2F07%2F2013&utm_medium=email.

¹⁶Kochan, N (2013) "Diezani Alison-Madueke: The Woman Working to Clean up Africa's Dirty Oil," The Independent, 04 June.

Copyright © 2013 Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, All rights reserved.