



# POLICY BRIEF

## BEYOND RHETORIC: ADDRESSING THE TERRORISM PHENOMENA IN THE SAHEL

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**T**he Sahel faces a veritable perfect storm of political, social, economic and security challenges, all of which exacerbate, and are exacerbated by, the fragility of states in the region. The assessment of the situation reveals a deterioration of security, safety, and stability in the region. In this policy brief the authors look at the shortfalls of counter-terrorism response and proffer policy recommendations for future stability.

## KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Faced with the complex and sophisticated attacks, stakeholders in the Sahel region have responded by deploying contingents aimed at combating and countering the spread of terrorism.
- ▶ The trends in terrorist activities and counter-terrorism efforts observed in the Sahel is rather not encouraging.
- ▶ Undermining the success of counter-terrorism efforts, is the discontent among troops, as exemplified by instances of military personnel refusing to take part in operations or abandoning their posts.
- ▶ The lack of capacity to confront the challenge by state security apparatus is another issue. Inappropriate training, ill-equipped and a lack of ammunition, together with militants' prowess, contribute to low morale.
- ▶ Lack of financial capability of troop contributing countries to effectively resource personnel has resulted in logistical constraints of deployed troops.
- ▶ Corruption within government and state security apparatus has also contributed to the logistical constraints of the troops as there has been cases of politicians and senior military personnel misapplying funds meant of equipment and retooling of troops.
- ▶ Lack of coordination, cooperation and collaboration among the various deployed contingents operating in the same theatre of the Sahel is a major setback confronting the fight against terrorism.
- ▶ It has become apparent that the ever-growing focus on counter-terrorism, underscored by significant international (Western) efforts, seeks to abandon the implementation of peace accords and agreements, which is crucial not only for a security solution but also for a political resolution of the conflicts.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ Increasing troop levels, logistics, technical intelligence and target acquisition support for deployed security forces appears to require urgent attention.
- ▶ Enhancing the intelligence capability of the deployed troops and improving the operational cooperation of all the contingents in the operational areas of the Sahel could culminate in the defeat terrorism.
- ▶ Human security response approach to counter-terrorism, with the citizenry and local communities as the primary referent objects of national security policy formulation and implementation are worthwhile pathway to eschewing impunity and abuse of human rights.
- ▶ The protection and empowerment of local communities should be prioritized in order to ensure their resilience.
- ▶ Countries in the Sahel need to understand the transnational nature of the terrorist threat and therefore, the sine qua non requirement to share actionable intelligence in order to disrupt potential attacks and arrest criminal elements.
- ▶ In order to ensure and strengthen peaceful co-existence, the shaping of the intercommunity relations of ethnic based societies which have outstanding disputes borne out of history or mistrust is a priority that should engage the urgent attention of stakeholders particularly in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali.

## INTRODUCTION

Terrorism remains a significant threat to international peace and security<sup>1</sup>. The International Community, Regional Organizations, Governments, Military, Intelligence and Security Agencies, Civil Society and Local Communities have all come to terms with the fact that no country or community is immune to this threat and that a collaborative whole-of-society approach is required to effectively address the phenomenon. African countries have been particularly susceptible to the threat of terrorism due to weak institutions, porous borders, inadequately trained or ill-equipped security forces, historical grievances and lack of economic opportunities<sup>2</sup>. These factors have acted as catalysts for extremist ideologies to emerge and fester in parts of the continent. Terrorism could thus be viewed as deriving from multifactorial and extremely diverse dimensions which does not lend to prediction by one single variable. Although collaborative efforts are delivering some effective preventative and counter-measure responses, terrorist and violent extremist organizations continue to hold considerable initiative<sup>3</sup>. This is manifest in their capacity to launch sustained attacks and cause debilitating harm and destruction to security personnel, innocent civilians and property.

The Sahel has long been characterized by political violence, border permeability, territorial disputes, trafficking of all kinds, and ethnic-sectarian violence<sup>4</sup>. Instability in the Sahel dates to the colonial period resulting from demographic disposition and grievances shared by the various ethnic communities in northern Mali. Since independence, these long held

grievances were never resolved. Indeed, mistrust between the central government in Bamako, Arabs and the Tuaregs in northern Mali only deepened over time. Since the Tuareg uprising in 2011 and the French military intervention in Mali in 2013, instability and insecurity have been exacerbated by the resurgence of Islamic terrorist groups. Mixed with trafficking networks, separatist movements and other conflicts, the Sahel region has been exposed to violence and is increasingly being transformed into a crisis hub. Invariably, this has attracted attention from the international community, as threats of terrorism and related mobility issues have implications beyond the region.<sup>5</sup> The West African part of the Sahel region particularly Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria continue to witness persistent terrorist attacks even to the later parts of 2018 and early 2019<sup>6</sup>. This is a manifestation of the worsening security situation in many parts of the Sahel region. 2018 and 2019 have shown a spike in the number of attacks particularly by Boko Haram and its breakaway faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in Nigeria, Niger, and Chad, Jama'at Nustratal-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM) or the Group for the Support of Islam and Moslems (GSIM) in Mali and Burkina Faso and Ansarul Islam in Burkina Faso.

The deteriorating security situation in the Sahel has elicited support from the international community resulting in a multiplicity of both international and regional military deployment in the region. Despite the multiplicity of deployments, terrorist activities are far from abating. Some experts have often expressed concerns about the

appropriateness of the current counter-terrorism and peacebuilding measures that are deployed to address the situation in many quarters. What this policy brief seeks to do is to spotlight the current shortfalls of the counter-terrorism and peacebuilding measures adopted by all actors in the region in order to proffer workable recommendations aimed at effectively combating terrorism in these parts of Africa.

## OVERVIEW OF TERRORISM IN THE SAHEL

The Sahel region of Africa has become home to some of the world's deadliest terrorist groups in recent times resulting in numerous protracted atrocities committed against innocent civilians, security forces and government agencies<sup>7</sup>. Terrorist organizations have expanded their ambition, capabilities, capacities and geographical reach in the Sahel, with devastating impact on human security and economic development<sup>8</sup>. There appears to be a competition of Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda affiliation among terrorist groups in the Sahel. Al-Qaeda affiliated groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Macina Liberation Front (MLF), Ansarul Dine and Al- Mourabitoun operating under the name JNIM as well as Boko Haram and Ansarul Islam are very active in the region. Similarly, IS affiliated groups such as ISWAP and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have dominated the terrorism landscape in the Sahel particularly in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Mali and Burkina Faso. Attacks by these terrorist groups have killed tens of thousands of people and displaced millions more within and across national borders<sup>9</sup>. For instance in 2015, Boko

Haram killed more people than IS killed in Syria and Iraq combined. From June 2011 through June 2018, the Nigeria Security Tracker (NST) documented 2,021 incidents involving Boko Haram, in which 37,530 people were killed, nearly double the conventionally cited estimate of 20,000. Over the same period, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) identified 3,346 incidents, in which 34,261 people were killed<sup>10</sup>. As at March 31, 2019, the group has carried out 50 attacks and killed 204 persons<sup>11</sup>.

In Mali, the situation worsened in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising necessitating international intervention against armed groups from progressing to the capital city of Bamako<sup>12</sup>. The rise of extremist groups is exacerbating old inter-communal tensions between ethnic groups particularly those of Peul (Fulani) and Dogons<sup>13</sup>. On 23 March 2019 in Ogossagou, armed men dressed like traditional Dozo hunters attacked a Fulani community killing 160 people, including women and children. Similarly, about 100 members of the Dogon ethnic group were killed on 10 June 2019, in Sobame Da located in Mopti region. Due to its geographical location, Niger is exposed to criminal activities, including terrorism, on multiple fronts. While groups such as JNIM and its affiliates generate insecurity at the border with Mali and Burkina Faso, the most notable threat is posed by Boko Haram. The South Eastern part of Niger particularly, the Diffa region is the most affected<sup>14</sup>. Despite claims that Boko Haram has been technically defeated following the intensification of counter terrorism operations carried out by the MNJTF in 2015, the group continue to carry



out attacks in northern Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and the Lake Chad Basin area of Chad<sup>15</sup>. The group had had to change tactics every now and then in order to continue to wreak havoc in its areas of operation. Terrorist activities have taken a terrible toll on local communities that were already fragile and economically marginalised. Burkina Faso is another country greatly affected by the scourge of terrorism in the Sahel in recent times. Between January 2016 and June 2019, an estimated number of 521 terrorist related attacks were recorded, resulting in the deaths of over 750 people<sup>16</sup>. The fear however, is that, if the terrorists win in Burkina Faso, the country could become a launchpad for terrorists to expand their influence to the coast of West Africa and even beyond.

## IDENTIFYING THE ROOT CAUSES

While the incidence and spread of terrorism in the Sahel cannot be attributed to any single factor, reference is copiously made by scholars and practitioners on causal factors such as political grievances, relative deprivation and actual or perceived injustice which tend to act as catalysts and exploited by terrorist groups to justify the need to distrust government and to cause a change through violent means. While many authors have alluded to the vast geographic nature of the Sahel belt as fertile grounds for insurgencies and insurrections, others have cited the meeting of different and occasionally hostile creeds and ideologies. Nomadic pastoralists come into contact with agrarians, while predominantly Muslim northerners meet with Christian and animist southerners. Arabs, Berbers and Tuareg meet sub-

Saharan (black) Africans. This meeting of different peoples has resulted in violence, and further created historical tribal rivalries and conflicts with occasional clashes. The inter-communal/ethnics violence has been exacerbated due to the rise in extremist groups.

Some proximate causal factors identified include poor communication and mistrust between government and local communities, lack of government presence in local communities, inability of government to provide the basic needs of local communities, lack of opportunities, unemployment, lack of accountability by political office holders, corruption, injustice, impunity, discrimination, exclusive politics and other context specific good governance deficits. These create conditions of disillusionment, hopelessness and frustration in local communities and facilitate radicalization as well as resort to acts of violent extremism and terrorism. Also, the lack of economic and financial capacities of Sahel countries to deliver on the expectations of the citizenry are also proximate causal factors to the state of disillusionment, hopelessness and frustration in a number of instances.

The incidence of militant religious extremism, the presence and activities of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs), the running of criminal/illicit economy, and the trafficking of weapons and drugs are considered as key external causal factors. The threat of terrorism in the Sahel continues to evolve around local terrorist groups and insurgencies with a Militant Salafi-Jihadism worldview and an affiliation to either Al-Qaeda or Islamic State. The world view dimension of the terrorist groups also facilitates the provision and

receipt of support. These groups, tend to profess an extremist religious world view with a strategic terrorism objective. In both of these cases, an examination of the Ways, Means and Ends employed and pursued by these groups reveals that external factors play a major part in sustaining their activities. There appears to be an externally driven grand strategy to suppress Islamic Sufism and aggressively diffuse and propagate a Salafist-jihadist ideology in the Sahel through militancy. The activities of most terrorist groups in the Sahel indicate consonance with this grand strategy. The Salafist-jihadist ideology projects a deviation of the dictates of the Islam faith and strict adherence contrary to what the local African communities have practiced over centuries and which is tolerant of other faiths and cultures. This is a recipe for confrontation.

## COUNTER-TERRORISM SHORTCOMINGS

Faced with the complex and sophisticated terrorist attacks, stakeholders in the Sahel region have responded by deploying troops aimed at combating terrorism. Given the level of terrorist activities, it comes as no surprise that the region as a whole has undergone a process of securitization in recent years, which has resulted in a multitude of forces on the ground. The current deployment in the Sahel include G5 Sahel Joint Force, Operation Barkhane, Multi National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and well as the national armies of the respective countries. The trends in terrorist activities and counter-terrorism efforts

observed in the Sahel is rather not encouraging. Counter-Terrorism response has been fraught with a lot of difficulties and challenges leading to the worsening and deterioration of the security situation in most countries of the Sahel. This has a potential of spreading to other neighboring countries. A number of shortcomings could be cited.

Undermining the success of the counter-terrorism efforts, is the discontent among troops, as exemplified by instances of military personnel refusing to take part in operations or abandoning their posts. This is further compounded by the mistrust among troop contributing countries with some troops always in a hurry to announce victory without crediting the entire force. This has often led to disagreements among countries contributing troops to the counter-terrorism efforts thereby derailing the progress of the force.

The lack of capacity to confront the challenge by state security apparatus is another issue<sup>17</sup>. Inappropriate training, ill-equipped and a lack of ammunition, together with militants' prowess, contribute to low morale. Counter-terrorism operations require specific training, equipment, intelligence, logistics, capabilities and specialized military preparation. It would seem unrealistic to expect any significant improvement on this front in the short and medium terms, partly because of funding constraints and delays in deployment for some of the missions, such as G5 Sahel Joint Force. Lack of financial capability of troop contributing countries to effectively resource personnel has resulted in logistical constraints of deployed troops<sup>18</sup>. Corruption

within government and state security apparatus has also contributed to the logistical constraints of the troops as there have been cases of politicians and senior military personnel misapplying funds meant of equipment and retooling of troops.

Lack of coordination, cooperation and collaboration among the various deployed troops in the Sahel is a major setback confronting the fight against terrorism. There have been cases of some deployments refusing to share intelligence with other contingents operating in the same theatre, thereby undermining their military capability to curtail the scourge of terrorism. The delay in the response of some non-national contingents to distress calls from national authorities of the member states in which they are deployed is also another challenge.

In addition, it has become apparent that the ever-growing focus on counter-terrorism, underscored by significant international (Western) efforts, seeks to abandon the implementation of peace accords and agreements such as the 2015 Algiers Peace Accord in Mali, which is crucial not only for a security solution but also for a political resolution of the conflict. In some cases also, the security situation has made it difficult for governments to implement reforms needed to address root causes fueling the spread of terrorism. Similarly, the influx of foreign support and resources to address security challenges such as terrorism and human trafficking appears to fail to address much-needed reforms in state behavior, governance and justice, which are significant factors in driving violence and radicalization.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SUB-REGIONAL SECURITY

The terrorism situation is not affecting only countries in the Sahel but the whole of the West African Sub-region. Apart from those currently in the eye of the storm, all other West African states have become potential targets of terrorism. The situation in the Sahel region also has serious economic, political, social and human security implications, all of which affect the general security architecture and landscape in the region and even beyond. Politically, the situation in the Sahel has led to the downfall of a number of democratically elected governments and disoriented existing political systems and structures in others. In the aftermath of the uprising in northern Mali in 2012, the then President, Amadou Toumani Tuore was overthrown by the mutinying Malian soldiers displeased with the management of the Tuareg rebellion and the rising Islamic jihadism in the country. In 2019, following the rise in the number of kidnappings and jihadist attacks in Burkina Faso, the government begun facing growing public pressure with direct calls on the Prime Minister, Defense and Security Ministers to resign. On 19 January 2019, Prime Minister Paul Kaba Thieba, and his entire cabinet resigned from their various positions. The resignation was believed to have been due to the surge in militant activities. The change in government and officials due to the deteriorating situation often leads to ad hoc policies.

Economically, the impact and consequences of terrorism in the Sahel and the broader West African sub-region are dire. Terrorism creates a feeling of

vulnerability in the country where the attacks occur. This can have a broader economic impact. The sense of vulnerability is particularly damaging to trade or foreign direct investment (FDI) because, foreign investors always have a choice of conducting business with less-risk-prone nations. Terrorism alters the composition of government expenditure, with the defense component of government expenditure rising vis-a-vis other expenditure items, such as schools, hospitals, roads, industry among others. In the particular case of Nigeria, terrorism is said to have led to a loss of nearly 1% of GDP per annum<sup>19</sup>. One aspect that has been heavily affected by terrorism is tourism in the region, thus impacting negatively on the economic outlook of the affected countries.

Socially, the implication of terrorism on the social fabric of society and behavioral well-being of people are worth noting. In many areas in the Sahel where the activities of terrorist are high, schools have closed down forcing children of school going age to stay home. In Burkina Faso, more than 2,024 schools have been forced shut, depriving over 330,000 children of education<sup>20</sup>. The situation is even worse in northern and central Mali. More than 500,000 children have been denied access to education due to insecurity<sup>21</sup>. In Nigeria, an estimated number of over 100,000 children are said to be out of school due to terrorism. In the Sahel in general, more than 10.5 million children are estimated to be out of school. The consequences are that, the youth will grow up becoming economically marginalized, frustrated, and resentful towards central government and become susceptible to recruitment by terrorist groups.

Terrorism is a usurper of human security. The threats of violent extremism and terrorism in the Sahel have resulted in massive sub-regional migrations by people who are internally displaced. Countries in the Sahel are grappling with a complex humanitarian emergency. Recent estimates show that 2.4 million people are uprooted, including over 1.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in North-eastern Nigeria, over 471,000 IDPs in Cameroon, Chad and Niger and over 228,000 refugees<sup>22</sup>. In Burkina Faso, recurrent armed attacks and insecurity have now displaced more than 170,000 people and over 20,000 people uprooted from their homes<sup>23</sup>. More than 95 communities and villages are said to be in urgent need of shelter, food, water and health services. There is also a growing challenge of protecting the IDPs, which is compounded by the deteriorating security situation as well as socio-economic fragility with communities in the Sahel facing chronic poverty, a harsh climate, recurrent epidemics, poor infrastructure and access to basic amenities. The growing number of IDPs and refugee camps are something that should engage the attention of all stakeholders in Sahel and the West Africa sub-region. As the terrorist activities in the Sahel continue to spread along the Burkina Faso and Niger axes, the coastal countries of Benin, Togo, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire become a safe place for refugees. Refugee camps have been established in these countries. The refugee camps could be used by terrorist groups as safe havens to recruit and store weapons to launch attacks in their area of operations as well as the host countries.



## CONCLUSION: THE WAY FORWARD

The challenges and shortcomings of counter-terrorism response and peacekeeping measures should not detract from the progress made by local and international security deployments. Rather, they should act as a reminder of the need for collaborative efforts; and that complacency is dangerous and the road to sustainable stability across the region remains a long and insidious one. Increasing troop levels, logistics, technical intelligence and target acquisition support for deployed security forces appears to require urgent attention. In this regard, the delay in the full deployment of the G5 Sahel Joint Force could be said to be a major shortcoming. Enhancing the intelligence capability of the deployed troops and improving the operational cooperation of all contingents in the operational area of the Sahel could culminate in the defeat of the terrorist groups.

While there is the need to do more to support counter-terrorism operations underpinned by actionable intelligence in order to improve security and stability, a human security response approach should inform military concepts of operation. Ensuring future stability will require far more than a purely military approach. Placing emphasis on kinetic militaristic strategies to counter violent extremism and defeat terrorism will not be enough unless they are conducted in tandem with addressing the root causes such as marginalization, poverty and social exclusion, injustice, lack of rule of law, and bad governance in the Sahel. Although military strategies are justifiable in combative situations, more pragmatic preventive measures are required for lasting solutions. Policies

geared towards preventing and combating violent extremism must necessarily consider creating conducive economic atmosphere and a sense of belonging, particularly for young people to be productive and contribute to the socio-economic development of their communities and countries.

There is, therefore, the need to secure a commitment of Africa's political elite to the realization that military power per se as a guarantor of national security has the propensity to degenerate into regime security and that, the referent object of national security need necessarily be the individual citizenry and their local communities. This entails the identification of their vulnerabilities, ensuring their protection and their empowerment to acquire the required resilience that enables them live in dignity. The protection and empowerment of local communities should be prioritized in order to ensure their resilience. The lack of opportunities for young people, political impunity, exclusion, marginalization, effects of climate change, competition for scarce resources and underdevelopment are all concerns which if not addressed, in local communities, present a high risk of further escalation of discontent that could lead to the commission of more atrocities. The pursuit of justice, participatory political policies, and the promotion of favorable socio-economic conditions that promote human development, human rights and inclusive policies in local communities should be regarded as effective means of addressing the conditions that are conducive for the spread of extremist ideologies which ultimately lead to violent extremism and terrorism

A Human security approach to preventing and countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism, with the citizenry and local communities as the primary referent objects of national security policy formulation and implementation are a worthwhile pathway to eschewing impunity and abuse of human rights. This would intend help build mutual trust, social cohesion and a sense of common purpose between the government and the citizenry. Without these, military expenditure and counter-terrorism operations in conflict zones where poverty and marginalization are pervasive could remain a mirage.

Countries in the Sahel need to understand the transnational nature of the terrorist threat and, therefore, the sine qua non requirement to share actionable intelligence in order to disrupt potential attacks and arrest criminal elements. Local Communities (LCs) and Civil Society Organization (CSOs) could contribute a great deal to intelligence gathering and information sharing, culminating in the defeat of terrorist groups. Care has to be taken of the fact that, local communities have become vulnerable to terrorist activities partly due to their collaboration with security agents. In some cases, community members who provided information to security agents have been executed by terrorist groups for collaborating with security services. This has created mistrust between local citizens and governments, as the citizens perceive the security services of being unable to protect whistle blowers.

In order to ensure and strengthen peaceful co-existence, the shaping of the intercommunity relations of ethnic based societies which have outstanding

disputes borne out of history or mistrust is a priority that should engage the urgent attention of community leaders, Local Government authorities and policy makers, particularly in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

## NOTES

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**T**he African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) was established as a structure of the African Union in 2004. The decision to establish the Centre was taken in 2002 as part of the AU Plan of Action to Prevent and Combat of Terrorism. Its primary role is to assist AU member States build their Counter-Terrorism capacities. Its mandate includes the conduct of research, analysis and studies on the terrorism situation and terrorist groups in Africa, maintaining a terrorism database, centralizing information on terrorism and sharing this with AU Member States. The Centre conducts assessment missions to various AU Member States in order to ascertain their Counter-Terrorism capability and compliance with International Legal instruments and then provide advice on what needs to be done. In its capacity building effort, the Centre conducts seminars, workshops and training sessions in various aspects of Counter-terrorism for Member States and facilitates the drafting of their Counter-Terrorism legislation, strategies and Plans of Action in accordance with human rights requirements.

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