

CSS | ISSUE BRIEF

WHY TERRORISM CONTINUES TO FLOURISH IN WESTERN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Western Africa has witnessed a spurt in terrorist activities in recent decades. Outfits such as the Islamic State and Al-Qaida are increasing their presence in the region. This rise could be attributed to several different factors. A mixture of communal tensions, radical Islamism and anti-American sentiments pave the way for increasing insurgent activities in the region. A vast number of people have been killed, and several have been displaced due to these threats. Despite several interventions by the governments and other regional and international powers, terrorism continues to persist in the region. The following sections of this paper will look into the factors causing these outfits to thrive.

BACKGROUND

The situation in Western Africa is worsening with each passing day due to the terrorist outfits that are increasingly flourishing in the region. The region witnessed the rise of several regional insurgent groups such as Boko Haram, which took advantage of the poor situation in the region to spread its influence. Further, prominent groups such as the Islamic State and Al-Qaida have started gaining a foothold in the region. Since the international powers defeated the caliphate established in the Middle Eastern region by the Islamic State, the terrorist outfits have increasingly turned their focus towards the Western African region.¹

Several factors lead to the rise of terrorism. These factors can be abundantly observed in different scenarios in the Western African region. Firstly, nationalism. A group that feels alienated by the government often tends to take up arms and engage in an insurgency.

The second factor, widespread poverty and economic inequality, can be widely observed in Western Africa. This issue is recurring in the region, with many countries facing inequalities in development and the terrorist outfits taking advantage of the situation to recruit members. Given the absence of a strong democracy and the resultant, political instability in countries, this becomes the perfect stage for terrorist organizations to thrive. The Sahel belt, which will be discussed in the following section, has seen growing instability due to similar reasons. The effect of climate change in the region has also led to a severe lack of resources. Hence, many

¹ Gardner, Frank. "Is Africa Overtaking the Middle East as the New Jihadist Battleground?" BBC News. BBC, December 3, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55147863>

citizens who are left without a job and are unable to meet even their basic needs, look towards terrorist outfits to fend for them.²

PROBLEM WITH THE SAHEL BELT

The Sahel is a belt in Africa that includes Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Niger and other countries.³ Recently the belt has witnessed a sudden surge in the number of violent terrorist activities, with organizations such as Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb asserting their presence in the region.⁴ The growing instability in the Sahel belt has been a cause of international concern. France has led a coalition, fighting alongside the United States and the UN Peacekeeping Forces to ensure better stability in the region.⁵ The Sahel region has been widely struck by climate change and the depletion of resources. Poverty, hunger and disease have spread all across the region. The whole belt is characterised by high economic disparities and a lack of proper governance and development. These factors make the region a fertile ground for terrorist activities.⁶ The instabilities stem from several other disputes, with the primary one being the crisis in Mali. The issue of Mali will be discussed in the later sections of the paper. The growing instability in the region has hit countries like Burkina Faso, which historically have not witnessed such issues. The rise of terrorism in the region displays how poverty and economic inequalities are related to the rise of terrorism.

THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

During colonial times, Nigeria was split into a northern and southern protectorate. The colonizers prioritized the southern region due to its resource availability and connectivity to the sea. This divide paved the way for several differences among the Nigerian population. Firstly, modern-day Nigeria includes many tribes who have not had cordial relations with each other historically. Furthermore, the divide between the north and the south led to discrimination in the development of the country. The north faced several issues like poverty while the south

² Imhonopi, David & Urim, Ugochukwu. (2016). THE SPECTRE OF TERRORISM AND NIGERIA'S INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT: A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER IMPERATIVE. African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies. Volume 9. 20-40.

³ UNOCHA. "Sahel: \$1.6 Billion Appeal to Address Widespread Humanitarian Crisis." OCHA, March 1, 2019. <https://www.unocha.org/story/sahel-16-billion-appeal-address-widespread-humanitarian-crisis>.

⁴ Lacher, Wolfram. "Organized Crime and Terrorism in the Sahel." SWP Berlin, January 2011. https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2011C01_lac_ks.pdf.

⁵ Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères. "The International Coalition for the Sahel." France Diplomacy - Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. Accessed July 5, 2021. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/terrorism-france-s-international-action/article/the-international-coalition-for-the-sahel>.

⁶ Schmauder, Anna. "The 'Fight against Terrorism' in the Sahel Revisited." Clingendael, 2020. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/fight-against-terrorism-sahel-revisited>.

was flourishing. The colonial rule also introduced Christianity to the country, with the southerners converting to Christianity in much larger numbers than the northerners, who practiced Islam. This forced a significant religious divide in the country, which acted as a bedrock for religious terrorism.⁷ However, the rise of terrorism in the country cannot be attributed to religion alone. A positive relationship can be established between the economic situation of the country and the rise of violence in the region. Unemployment, economic hardships, lack of basic amenities and the lack of securities in the country, all contribute towards the flourishing of terrorist outfits. In addition, Nigeria's long history of poor governance and corruption also massively influence the rise of terrorism in the region. Several tribes and regions in the nation feel alienated by the central government, leading to disputes. The first instance of this was the Civil War between the government and the Igbo people, who seceded to form the Republic of Biafra.⁸

In more recent times, the most significant cause of concern for the nation is the terrorist outfit, Boko Haram. The organisation is responsible for the displacement of more than 2.5 million Nigerians, with around 200,000 seeking refuge in neighbouring countries (US Gov, 2016). Boko Haram emerged as an innocent-looking Islamic fundamentalist organization that indulged in empty rhetoric, however, since 2009, it has pulled a string of deadly attacks which have shaken the nation.

While Nigeria has witnessed several armed insurgents fighting against political repression and economic hardship, Boko Haram presented several new dynamics to the nation. The Boko Haram represented a virulent and radical form of religious fundamentalism and forcefully attempted to impose a religious ideology on a secular state. Boko Haram, which literally means "Western Education is forbidden", stems out of hatred for the western culture and an opposition against the government of Nigeria. Following a failed military uprising in 2009, the Boko Haram came into the attention of the international community several times over the past decade. The outfit received global outrage in April 2016, when it kidnapped 276 schoolgirls from a boarding school in Chibok.⁹

Lately, the Boko Haram started splitting into several factions due to the rise of the Islamic State Western African Province (ISWAP) which is another leading cause of concern for the nation. The ISWAP took advantage of the instability in the country and offered assistance to people in the region it dominates, hence winning over people's minds. Recently, the rivalry between the ISWAP and Boko Haram took a violent turn, and the Islamic State claims it has killed Boko

⁷ Afolabi, Olalekan, "Terrorism in Nigeria: Culmination of Economic Disenfranchisement, Social Marginalization and Political Instability" (2013). CUNY Academic Works. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_etds_theses/390.

⁸ Imhonopi, David & Urim, Ugochukwu. (2016). THE SPECTRE OF TERRORISM AND NIGERIA'S INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT: A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER IMPERATIVE. African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies. Volume 9. 20-40.

⁹ Jones, Mayeni. "Nigeria Kidnappings: The Chibok Captive Who Defied Boko Haram." BBC News. BBC, March 9, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56321789>.

Haram leader Shekau in 2021.¹⁰ Starting from 2015, the United States government and other western forces have joined hands with the African leaders to counter the threat of the Boko Haram insurgents. The coalition was successful to an extent; however, the Boko Haram still remains prominent in the Lake Chad region.¹¹ While the conflict in the Lake Chad basin would be discussed in the following section, one must importantly note the reasons for the rise of terrorism in Nigeria. Nigeria is one of the leading countries in the Western African region, and years of unstable politics formed a fertile breeding ground for insurgencies in the country. The case is similar for other countries as well. Instability in the region, along with economic disparities act as the *raison d'être* for the rising juggernaut of terrorist outfits in the region.

INSTABILITIES IN THE LAKE CHAD BASIN

The Lake Chad was once Africa's largest freshwater body and acted as a source of livelihood for more than 30 million people. However, the unsustainable usage of the lake, together with climate change, has caused an enormous depletion of the lake. This has led to severe economic impacts in the basin which has paved the way for instability and disturbances in the region.¹² The region's poor governance and widespread poverty work in favour of terrorist groups who thrive in such conditions. Counter-terrorism efforts in the region often fail because the governments involved tend to ignore the root humanitarian causes which has brought the situation this far.¹³ Due to poor governance and the high-level of corruption in the region, the residents often look up towards outfits such as ISWAP, which engage in developmental activities. This increases their popularity and leads to new recruits.¹⁴ The Lake Chad basin is an example of how humanitarian issues like resource depletion and economic inequalities often lead to insurgencies. The international organisations and regional governments rather than focusing solely on counter-terrorism activities, must first pay attention to these underlying causes. The power vacuum created in the region will lead to more rebel activities, and thus, good governance in the region must be high on the priority list.

¹⁰ AfricaNews. "Nigeria's Boko Haram Leader 'Wounded' in Clashes - Reports." Africanews. Africanews, May 20, 2021. <https://www.africanews.com/2021/05/20/nigeria-s-boko-haram-leader-wounded-in-clashes-reports/>.

¹¹ Brechenmacher, Saskia. "Stabilizing Northeast Nigeria After Boko Haram." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 3, 2019. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/05/03/stabilizing-northeast-nigeria-after-boko-haram-pub-79042>.

¹² ShelterBox. "Lake Chad Basin Crisis - Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Chad." ShelterBox, July 5, 2021. <https://www.shelterbox.org/where-we-work/lake-chad-basin-crisis/>.

¹³ Médecins Sans Frontières. "Lake Chad Crisis in Depth: MSF." Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) International, February 4, 2020. <https://www.msf.org/lake-chad-crisis-depth>.

¹⁴ United Nations. "Better Governance of Underfunded, Poorly Managed Lake Chad Basin Key to Resolving Conflict, Suffering across Region, Speakers Tell Security Council | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases." United Nations. United Nations, 2018. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13259.doc.htm>

INSURGENCIES IN MALI

Mali is the eighth-largest country in the African continent. It became an independent country in 1960, and the post-independence history of the country is characterised by political instability, failures of democracy and economic hardships. However, terrorism in Mali began to flourish only in recent decades. Malian terrorism can be attributed to a few key events in neighbouring countries. Firstly, the Algerian Civil War. The civil unrest in Algeria started in 1991, following a controversial military coup negating the results of an election favouring the Islamist party. The conflict set the foundations for the terrorist outfit, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which is prominent in Mali today.¹⁵ The jihadist non-state actors in Algeria who were defeated in the Civil War fled to the northern regions of Mali, where they engaged in criminal activities during the following decade. Secondly, the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) intervention in Libya, which led to the fall of the Gaddafi regime, impacted the Malian situation. Numerous weapons and arms flowed into Mali and fuelled insurgent movements in the country.¹⁶ For instance, armed with these weapons, Tuareg rebels in northern Mali took power in the region and began imposing Sharia Law. The AQIM and Movement of Oneness and Jihad in Western Africa (MOJWA) gained a foothold in this region and began ruling the north of the country.¹⁷ The 2012 Tuareg Rebellion, followed by the Coup d'état against the central government in the same year, left the country in chaos. Following which, Ibrahim Keita was elected President in 2013.¹⁸ A global coalition led by France landed in Mali to fight the insurgents. The United Nations Peacekeeping force also launched MINUSMA (The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) to bring stability to the country. After various attempts at peace, the Tuareg rebellion finally came to an end, albeit on paper, following the ceasefire agreement in 2015.¹⁹ Nevertheless, terrorist activities did not end here. The years following the military coup in the country led to high political instability, and the new government could not curb corruption and started becoming unpopular among the masses.

¹⁵ European Council on Foreign Relations. "Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel." Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) - Mapping armed groups in Mali and the Sahel, 2019. https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/aqim.

¹⁶ Patrick , Stewart M. "Collateral Damage: How Libyan Weapons Fueled Mali's Violence." Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations, 2013. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/collateral-damage-how-libyan-weapons-fueled-malis-violence>.

¹⁷ "Mali Tuareg Rebels Declare Independence in the North." BBC News. BBC, April 6, 2012. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-17635437>.

¹⁸ Nossiter, Adam. "Soldiers Overthrow Mali Government in Setback for Democracy in Africa." The New York Times. The New York Times, March 22, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/23/world/africa/mali-coup-france-calls-for-elections.html>.

¹⁹ Nyirabikali , Gaudence. "Mali Peace Accord: Actors, Issues and Their Representation." SIPRI, 2015. <https://www.sipri.org/node/385>.

Further, questions could be raised over the implementation of the peace deal with the northern rebels as well. The talks were held between the government and only a limited number of organisations, who benefitted from the deal. The outfits which were ostracised felt alienated by both the government and the signatories. Following the ceasefire agreement, several outfits have exploited local grievances towards the government and communal tensions in the region to expand their influence.²⁰ Mali's political scenario became even worse in 2020 when a military junta ousted the Keita government and called for fresh elections.²¹

Mali's northern region still remains predominantly influenced by the Jihadist groups, and a rising number of people are being forced to take refuge in other countries. Mali's jihadist problems could be attributed to its neighbours; however, Mali's fragile political ground also provides a platform on which terrorist outfits thrive.

CONCLUSION

The current situation of terrorism in Western Africa stems from the political instability and economic disparities in the region. The government and other forces who have attempted to counter this spread have focused solely on counter-terrorism operations. While these efforts can work to an extent in the short run, it is not a long-term solution. The international community's regime change efforts in Libya have failed and led to instabilities in the region, even spreading to the Western African region. The governments and international organisations should focus primarily on economic development in the Sahel region. This region is poorly developed, and the governments rarely have any power over these regions. Good governance in the belt is also very vital if the situation needs to be tackled appropriately. Managing climate change and implementing sustainable development goals can also be a practical step in guaranteeing peace and stability in the region for a longer period. Until now, the efforts have not reaped any result; however, one can only hope for the governments to take a comprehensive approach in order to shape the future of this region, which holds high economic potential. One can say Western Africa's best days are still ahead of it.

²⁰ Devermont, Judd. "Why Mali Needs a New Peace Deal." Why Mali Needs a New Peace Deal | Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 28, 2021. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-mali-needs-new-peace-deal>.

²¹ Taylor, Adam. "Analysis | The First Coup D'etat of the Coronavirus Era." The Washington Post. WP Company, August 20, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/08/20/mali-coup-coronavirus/>.