3

Mapping the contours of terrorism and counterterrorism in Africa

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Introduction

Africa, the second largest and second most-populous continent in the world, is currently under the threat of complex terrorist situations that have significantly transformed its security landscape. The phenomenon of terrorism is, however, not new in the continent having manifested in various forms during the colonial period and thereafter. The emergence of Al-Qaeda networks such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram further heightened the threat of terrorism across the continent. These and other terrorist groups have exploited factors such as governance deficit, ethno-religiosity, and other grievances to undermine the authority of African governments and the wellbeing of its citizens. Ironically, initiatives by African governments at national, regional, continental, and global levels in countering terrorism appear not to have achieved the desired result. This chapter reflects on the trend of terrorism in Africa and the counterterrorism efforts of African states at individual and collective levels. It surmises that African governments need to go beyond prescribing standards to pursuing pragmatic and concerted efforts against all forms of terrorism in line with the principle that terrorism in one country is terrorism in all.

Terrorism and the fight against terrorism have assumed such monumental dimensions that no part of the world can claim to be immune, either directly or indirectly. In Africa, terrorism occurs in many guises and locations with the acts justified by a plethora of different ideologies and grievances. The phenomenon is also not new in the continent when viewed from the multiplicity of scholarly perspectives on the subject. Crenshaw (1994: 4), for instance, traces the origin of terrorism in Africa to the colonial period. According to her, terrorism was a feature within resistance movements, military coups, political assassinations, and various intra- and inter-state wars that affected most African states at some point during the continent’s transition to independence and subsequent post-colonial period. Accordingly, it could be said that domestic cases of terrorism particularly those perpetrated by perceived marginalised groups, and by the state against the groups in the form of political repression, have been rife across the African continent.

On the other hand, cases of international terrorism in Africa became pronounced from the 1990s particularly in Sudan where Osama Bin Laden was believed to have operated, and where
the attempted assassination of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was organised (Lyman, 2008: 249–259). The blowing up of the American embassy in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam by Al-Qaeda cells in 1998 was a further indication of the dawn of international terrorism in Africa (Mayer, 2008: 114). In the 2000s, AQIM, Al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram emerged amidst other forms of terrorism in the continent. The activities of these groups further worsened Africa’s terrorism situation. For instance, in 2012, Islamists linked to AQIM seized the opportunity of Mali’s loss of control over its northern parts to capture key towns. In Somali and its neighbouring countries, the Al Shabaab group has continually mounted attacks against citizens, government forces, and international peacekeepers. Similarly, in Nigeria, an Islamic sect popularly known as Boko Haram emerged spreading its activities to the neighbouring countries of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon in the Lake Chad region. Further compounding the threat is the growing quest by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to expand its influence in Africa as demonstrated by the activities of the Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP).

The threat posed by terrorism to the integrity of African states and the wellbeing of their citizens has been enormous thereby leading to its placement in the front burner of the security agenda of many of the affected states. Counterterrorism measures have been put in place by some African governments at the national level, and similar mechanisms have been replicated at the sub-regional/regional and continental levels. For instance, the Nigerian government emplaced a National Cybersecurity Policy and Strategy to contain cyberterrorism as well as the Policy Framework and National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism to tackle tendencies that breed terrorism. The African Union (AU) has championed a number of protocols and conventions towards collective counterterrorism efforts at the continental level, including harnessing the efforts of the United Nations (UN) and other international partners. In spite of all these arrangements, terrorism in Africa remains far from being contained implying that the counterterrorism efforts of African governments, both individually and collectively, seem not to have yielded satisfactory outcomes. While the focus of this chapter is on making an overview of the trend of terrorism and counterterrorism in Africa, some pertinent question would need answers, such as: why is terrorism prevalent in Africa, and how has been the conduct of counterterrorism in terms of the implementation of policy, legal, and other frameworks? In line with this is the appropriateness and effectiveness of the strategies adopted by African governments and by extension the way forward for effective counterterrorism in the continent. The Chapter will begin by providing a conceptual and historical overview of terrorism in Africa to facilitate a better understanding of the aforementioned issues that the chapter seeks to address.

Conceptual and historical overview of terrorism in Africa

The word “terrorism” is very popular, dynamic, and controversial. It is a very popular word in terms of frequency of usage; commonly used in the political lexicon as much the same way as the threat of it has become a daily occurrence in many countries of the world today. It is dynamic in the sense that it has changed both in meaning and nature from the French Revolution when it was used as a regime instrument, to a revolutionary, anti-monarchical and anti-anarchist forms; and assuming nationalist, separatist as well as ethno-religious and ideological (particularly anti-West) dimensions (Hoffman, 2006: 3–4). Terrorism is controversial in meaning, and it could be argued that a major issue in conceptualising terrorism is its definitional problem. The general consensus among scholars is that terrorism is a subjective and multifaceted
phenomenon that defies a universally accepted definition (Hoffman, 2006: 1–3; Gibbs, 2012: 63). In the light of this, Schmid and Jongman (2005: 6) observed that researchers from various fields “have spilled almost as much ink as the actors of terrorism have spilled blood” and yet have reached no consensus on what terrorism is. They counted 109 definitions of terrorism that covered a total of 22 different definitional elements of the term (Schmid et al., 1988: 5–6). In spite of this, it could be argued that defining terrorism, at least in context-specific terms, is invaluable for the understanding of any discourse on the subject, and as Boaz (2002: 288) also opines, for a successful counterterrorism effort.

In broad terms, terrorism is a tactic involving the use or threat of the use of violence by the individual, group(s), sub-state, or state actor(s) to register their grievances against existing political, economic, or social situations perceived as not favourable to them. They do this with the aim of intimidating or instilling fear into the population, thereby influencing the government to take or not to take a particular course of action. In conceptualising terrorism in Africa, however, the point needs to first be made that the threat of and vulnerability to terrorism differs from continent to continent, sub-region to sub-region, and state to state implying that regions and countries will interpret and react differently based on their unique perception of the threat. It is also worth noting that the notion on whether the person defining terrorism identifies with the victim or the perpetrator as aptly captured by the “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter” cliché that stresses the fact that the definition of terrorism depends on the perspective and world view of the one defining it (Boaz, 2002: 292; Hoffman, 2006: 24–25). Botha (2008: 28) opines that terrorism is not a new threat or concept in Africa, but what is worrying is the application of Western models to the situation in Africa which results in double standards and consequently negatively impacts the understanding of terrorism in Africa. She points to the fact that domestic terrorism presents a more immediate challenge in Africa, and indeed the developing world, than transnational terrorism which is experienced more in the developed world (Botha, 2008: 29). Domestic terrorism in this sense comprises terrorist acts usually conducted by local groups within the state for the purpose of overthrowing a government or achieving local political advantage (Okumu, 2009: 1). It also takes the form of repressive regimes and brutal subjugation of opposition.

The observed trend in Africa is that when a group resorts to violence against a government or segment of society; it is regarded as terrorism, but when the government or security forces use the same (and even worse) methods; this is paradoxically done in the name of state security. However, as Boaz (2002: 293) notes “when a group or organisation chooses terrorism as a means, the aim of their struggle cannot be used to justify their actions.” In this context, therefore, there is a need to regard terrorism as politically motivated acts of violence against a civilian population whether there are carried out by a state or a non-state actor. One is therefore content that the AU, perhaps in the realisation of the need to promote an African perspective of terrorism, took on a broad definition of terrorism when in its Act, it defines terrorism as:

…any act which is a violation of the criminal laws of a state party and which may endanger the life, physical integrity or freedom of, or cause serious injury or death to any person, any member or group of persons, or causes or may cause damage to public or private property, natural resources, environmental, or cultural heritage and is calculated or intended to:

(i). intimidate, put in fear, coerce or induce any government, body, institution, the general public or any segment thereof, to do or abstain from doing any act, or to adopt or abandon a particular standpoint or to act according to certain principles; or
(ii). disrupt any public service, the delivery of any essential service to the public or to create a public emergency; or
(iii). create general insurrection in a State.³

In article 3(1), the AU equally notes that:

(i). The struggle waged by peoples in accordance with the principles of international law for their liberation or self-determination, including armed struggle against colonialism, occupation, aggression and domination by foreign forces, and

(ii). Political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other motives shall not be a justifiable defence against a terrorist act.⁴

Conceptualised in this way, Oyeniyi (2010: 34–80) posits that the AU is clear on what terrorism in Africa is, and corroborates the fact that terrorism is not a new development in Africa.

In tracing the history of terrorism in Africa, it could be argued that although scholars such as Crenshaw (2009: 4) view the colonial period as ushering terrorism in the continent, traits of the phenomenon existed much earlier. Before the advent of colonialism, there were organised groups, societies, and kingdoms in Africa that are thought to have employed terrorist tactics of fear, intimidation, violence, and threat of violence against one another. For instance, Oyeniyi (2010: 34–80) points to the existence of socio-cultural and political groups in Nigeria such as Ndinche, Modewa, Aguren, Eso, Akoda and Ilari. More so, pre-colonial empires such as those of Egypt, Ethiopia, Wolof, and Mutapa are believed to have carried out acts against neighbouring kingdoms as well as quell internal opposition in a manner that would today qualify as state terrorism. Comolli (2015: 15–16) similarly notes that the Sokoto Caliphate employed intimidation and fear in expanding its territorial hold, and in propagating the religion of Islam across the Sahel.

During the colonial era, terrorist tactics of violence, intimidation, and fear were employed by the colonialists to coerce or persuade the local population into accepting regime policies (Oyeniyi, 2010: 34–80). On the other hand, the same tactic of violence and fear was used by some indigenous societies to resist colonial rule and/or fight for independence from the colonial government. An instance of this was the Mau Mau Uprising that emerged from the Kenyan African Union in the early 1950s to organise a militant kind of nationalism against the British colonial government. While the Mau Mau carried out attacks against the white settlers and their loyalists in protest against the colonial regime, the British forces allegedly engaged in torture and mass execution of the Mau Mau activists in a bid to suppress the group (Anderson, 2013: 150–154). It is in the light of this that some scholars such Okumu (2009: 1) view as a state of “official” terrorism the brutal suppression of perceived terror groups by the colonial government, and furthermore believe that colonialism sowed the seed of terrorism in Africa and other post-colonial societies.

The post-colonial era in Africa was characterised by the failure of most states to “settle down” and democratically manage their independence. The socio-political and economic structures handed down by the colonial government were apparently weak and were further weakened by competition for the control of power by the elites mainly along ethnoreligious and other divisive lines. Solomon (2015: 40) observes that ill-defined borders created by the colonial powers left several newly independent African states “with a seething mix of majority and minority ethnic groups” resulting in their having to negotiate “these competing and volatile racial, ethnic and religious identities.” Further worsening the situation were the spate of military coups and the tendency of some African leaders to hold tight to the reins of
government employing, in the process, brutal subjugation of opposition. These situations contributed to the emergence of violent non-state actors across the length and breadth of the continent. For instance, in North Africa, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) of Algeria, apparently in the pursuit of an Islamic state after Algerian independence, resorted to kidnapping, assassination, and bombings to destabilise and overthrow the Algerian government.

In the eastern and central parts of the continent, a number of the groups formed to fight for independence either metamorphosed or gave birth to splinter rebel groups that employed terrorist tactics with the aim of controlling or influencing government in their now independent states. Notable examples include the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in Eritrea, Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in Uganda with bases in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) also in Uganda with its activities spread across the DRC, Central African Republic (CAR), and South Sudan.

It is perhaps important to note here that wider political, ethnic, religious, and other grievances are a factor in the nature of terrorism and mode of operation of these terrorist groups. The ADF, for instance, comprise of membership mainly from the Muslim Tabliq Sect considered as self-identified “religious crusader”, employed methods of attacks varying from armed assaults and bombings to arson, kidnapping, and hostage-taking of youths, particularly school children (Forest and Giroux, 2011: 5–17). The ADF atrocity was to the extent that its members burnt to death 80 students of the Kichwamba Technical College in Kabarole district of Uganda by setting fire on their locked hostels (Forest and Giroux, 2011: 5–17). The LRA on the other hand is known to operate as an ideologically apocalyptic Christian group. With leadership provided by the Acholi tribe, the group has since its emergence in 1987 carried out widespread assassinations, arson, abductions, and child slavery (Davenport, 2011).

In Southern Africa, ethnic nationalism and race factor feature prominently in the strategic use of terrorism as a weapon by aggrieved groups to express their grievances. South Africa’s African National Congress (ANC) military wing, known as Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), between 1961 and 1990 carried out executions, torture, and assault against loyalists of the Apartheid regime as well as bombings of government installations to the extent that it was classified a terrorist organisation by the South African government and the United States. The narrative was similar in Zimbabwe where the nationalists, in pressing home their demand for black majority rule, engaged the then Rhodesian government in violent attacks while the Rhodesian government on its part formed the Selous Scouts that carried out raids, abductions, and bombings of civilian (nationalists) homes (Melson, 2005: 57). What appears to be an irony is that Robert Mugabe, one of the foremost Zimbabwean nationalist who became president of the country in 1980, adopted a sustained campaign of intimidation against political opponents in order to remain in power.

The West African sub-region has also had its share of domestic cases of terrorism in the post-colonial era. The Royal United Front (RUF) of Sierra Leone, which sought to overthrow the government in the 1990s, exemplifies this. The group was known for its assault on the civilian population particularly hacking off limbs to intimidate and spread fear among the population, as well as for its use of child soldiers. It allegedly received financial support and recruited members from neighbouring Liberia. In Liberia itself, there was political instability occasioned by coups and counter-coups and the emergence of rebel armed groups such as the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO). The armed groups, some of them using Sierra Leone, Cote d’Ivoire, and Guinea as staging areas, launched widespread acts of violence against the Liberian civilian population in attempts to take over the seat of government.
The foregoing discussion reiterates the point that terrorism in Africa has been interwoven in broader conflicts thereby making the phenomena both multifaceted and complex. Although many of the non-state actors originated and operated within specific countries, a number of others took advantage of tribal and socio-cultural affinity particularly among border communities to find safe-havens in neighbouring countries from where they receive logistic support, recruit members, plan, and conduct their activities in the targeted country.\(^6\) Equally, the conditions that foster terrorism – both pull and push factors – appear engendered within the African states and consequently the localisation of the threat posed by terrorism. This, however, changed as the fragile African states became vulnerable to a new wave of terrorism that is transnational, and more often than not, ideologically inspired.

A significant swathe of Africa ranging from the north to the south and east to west of the continent have now become frontlines in a global jihadi movement that often seeks to replace the secular status quo with Sharia-based governance (Antwi-Boateng, 2017: 253–284). The situation is grievous to the extent that in the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) ranking for 2016, ten out of the first 20 most terrorised countries in the world are African countries.\(^7\) The countries, as shown in Table 3.1, are fairly distributed across Africa indicating that the threat of terrorism traverses the continent. The major terrorist groups in Africa, as earlier mentioned and shown in Figure 3.1, include AQIM, Al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram with influx of Islamic State elements. They have all been inspired by radical Islamic ideology and, as Solomon (2015: 1–19) notes, are wreaking havoc across the African continent and beyond. It is this new and contemporary form of terrorism in Africa that I now focus on.

### Table 3.1 GTI Top 20 Most Terrorized Countries Ranking for 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>9.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>9.444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>9.314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>8.613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>8.587</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>8.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>7.548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>7.484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>7.328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>7.283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>7.132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>7.098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>7.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>6.738</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>6.706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>6.682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of the Congo</td>
<td>6.633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>6.578</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Central African Republic</td>
<td>6.518</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Africa’s security landscape is currently dotted with varying typologies and magnitudes of terrorism. While domestic cases of terrorism have held sway and predated the independence of many of the states, the new wave of transnational terrorism now prevails. The place of Africa in this new and contemporary terrorism is significant in many ways. Significant in this regard is the point that terrorists took advantage of the weak governments and poor security architecture of states in the continent to operate. The freedom of action offered by the ungoverned space enabled the terrorists to launch attacks on Western interests and institutions that could be said to have ostensibly become soft targets by virtue of their location in a continent composed of weak and fragile states. A corollary point to this is the prevalent poverty, famine, and general underdevelopment in the continent that made the ideology of the terrorists (that is essentially anti-status quo) appealing to the masses, and in the process attracting membership to terrorist organisations. To this effect, groups whose activities were hitherto localised and categorised as domestic terrorist groups took up the ideology propagated by the transnational groups and in the process became infused into the global jihadi network. More significant is the fact that Africa became a sanctuary for transnational terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda.

Sources:
- BBC
- GlobalPost
- Royal United Services Institute

Figure 3.1 Map of Africa Showing Main Terrorist Groups
became evident between 1991 and 1996 when Osama bin Laden shifted the base for his Mujahedeen operations to Sudan (Morell and Harlow, 2015: 13). Here, he established connections and supported both financially and militarily, Islamic jihadi networks in Egypt, Algeria, and Afghanistan.

The Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) that is allegedly linked to the earlier mentioned attempted assassination of Mubarak, and the GIA which was eclipsed by its splinter faction, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), all operated largely as Al-Qaeda cells. In 2006, a foremost EIJ and Al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, announced a union of the GSPC with Al-Qaeda and accordingly changed its name to AQIM in 2007 (Forest and Giroux, 2011: 5–17). The activities of AQIM now transcend Algeria to Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and to some extent Morocco, Mauretania, Nigeria, and Chad. Alongside AQIM emerged the Boko Haram Islamic sect that rose to become the world’s deadliest terrorist group in 2015. The group’s area of operation cuts across Nigeria (where it originated) to Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Extending the contour line of terrorism to the east and horn of Africa is the Al-Shabaab group. Originally a Somali-based group, its foray along the Somali-Kenya border and attacks on the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) peacekeepers made the group a compelling terrorist threat in the region.

The AQIM, Boko Haram, and Al-Shabaab, alongside their ancillary and splinter groups, as well as Islamic State affiliates are arguably the current most dominant terrorist groups in the continent. Their activities bear marked similarities. For instance, they all engage in an antigovernment campaign aimed to establish an Islamic state in place of the existing secular states, which they regard as having been corrupted with Western values. However, remarkable differences exist that are peculiar to their historical, socio-cultural, economic, and political environments necessitating that the nature of the terrorist threat, motivations, mode of operation, and affiliations as espoused by these dominant terrorist groups are better understood by examining them individually. The individual exploration of the emergence and activities of these Sects would also enable a better analysis of the counterterrorism drive of individual countries concerned as well as their regional initiatives.

**Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)**

The AQIM came into being in 2007 when the GSPC announced its allegiance to Al-Qaeda and changed its name to reflect its new status (Chivis and Liepman, 2013: 2–3). The group’s ideology is rooted in Salafi-Jihadist doctrine with the political aim of overthrowing the secular governments in the North African states of Algeria, Mauretania, Morocco, Libya, and Tunisia, and replacing them with Islamic-styled governments based on Sharia Law. The AQIM has continued to push its violent activities southwards, deep into the Sahel and West African states of Mali, Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, and Niger. It carries out armed assault, hostage-taking, and kidnapping for ransom in these countries. Northwards, AQIM has threatened the European countries of Spain and France, which by location are contiguous, being separated only by the Mediterranean Sea. France in particular has continuously received threats of attacks from the AQIM due to the country’s historical, political and military ties with the governments of states in the Maghreb and Sahel (Laub and Masters, 2015). Its affiliates, sub-groups cum allies include Ansaru, Ansar Dine, Ansar al-Sharia, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQIAP), and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). In March 2017, an AQIM offshoot in the Sahara announced a fresh merger with Al-Mourabitoun (another AQIM splinter group based mainly in Algeria) and the Mali-based Ansar Dine to form Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimi.
Boko Haram

Also known by its original name, Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad, Boko Haram started as a quiet Islamic study group which became popular from 2002 under the leadership of one Mohammed Yusuf (Madike, 2011). The sect propagates an ideology that is highly critical of the Nigerian government and Western civilization. It thus attracted, or was used to easily manipulate the poor and unemployed who felt that their condition was caused by governance failure, corruption, and moral decadence. The group became violent from 2004 after a series of confrontations with the Nigerian security forces (Kyari 2014: 9–32). On 26 July 2009, Boko Haram staged an armed uprising in Bauchi that subsequently spread to Borno, Yobe, Kano, and other states in northern Nigeria. Mohammed Yusuf was arrested and later killed while in police custody (Onuoha, 2010: 54–67). The sect became more devastating under a new leader, Abubakar Shekau. It leveraged on Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) to undertake roadside, vehicle-borne, and suicide bombings including attacks on high profile targets such as the Nigerian Police Headquarters and the UN building in Abuja. It also captured an area in the northeast of Nigeria that equalled the size of Belgium (Comolli, 2015: 161).

Furthermore, Boko Haram’s activities spilled over to Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. The sect established links with AQIM, Al Shabaab, and in 2015 pledged allegiance to ISIS renaming itself as ISWAP.11 It employs media propaganda and particularly the Internet to convey its messages. The sect also engages in ISIS-styled beheadings of victims, abductions, and engagement of females (including girls as young as 10 years) for suicide terrorism (Akbar, 2015). On 14 April 2014, Boko Haram abducted about 276 girls from Government Girls’ School Chibok, an incident that attracted much global attention (Nti, 2014). In 2016, the Nigerian government claim that its military has decimated Boko Haram to the extent that it can no longer hold territory.12 However, the sect continues to carry out ambushes and suicide attacks in vulnerable communities particularly in the suburbs of Maiduguri town, Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps, and remote settlements in the northeast of Nigeria as well as in parts of neighbouring countries where there is a thin presence of troops.

Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab is a Somali-based Suni-Jihadi fundamentalist group that emerged as an offshoot of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) of Somalia. It became prominent after the defeat of the ICU by the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia and its Ethiopian allies in 2006 (Solomon, 2015: 39). Shuriye (2012) notes that the group’s political ideology is to establish an Islamic state of Somalia and eventually spill-over this ideology throughout the Horn of Africa and perhaps to the East and Central Africa. It, therefore, aims to destabilise and ultimately overthrow the government of Somalia while launching an offensive against Somali’s neighbours, AU and UN peacekeepers in retaliation for intervening on the part of the government. Al-Shabaab highly abhors Western values to the extent of banning radio stations from playing music and local video centres from showing foreign matches.13 It metes out harsh punishments such as the stoning of adulterers and amputating the hands of thieves.14 Al-Shabaab’s use of propaganda has been effective in conveying its messages and recruiting members. Its propaganda machinery includes radio and television broadcasts, and the use of the Internet particularly for twittering and micro-blogging (Odhiambo et al., 2013). The Sect pledged alliance to Al-Qaeda in 2012 and is thought to have links with AQIM, Boko Haram, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).15 Although the group has lost grounds, having been forced to retreat from major cities to some rural areas, it still carries out sporadic attacks and suicide bombings. The
Westgate Shopping Mall shooting on 21 September 2013, the attack on Garissa University College on 2 April 2015 and the United States military base at Lamu on 5 January 2020 in Kenya as well as on Somali’s Af-Uur military base on 8 June 2017, twin truck bomb in Mogadishu on 14 October 2017 and another truck bomb on 28 December 2019 were some of Al-Shabaab’s attacks in recent years that left scores of casualties.

Overview of counter terrorism in Africa

Counterterrorism operations involve offensive measures taken to prevent, deter, pre-empt, and respond to terrorism. In Africa, a lot of initiatives at countering terrorism have been undertaken, but how far the schemes and programmes have translated from theory to practice in terms of implementation remain a concern. Generally, counterterrorism in Africa could be viewed at the levels of national, sub-regional/regional, continental, and global effort.

At their respective national levels, African states have, among other measures, formulated counterterrorism strategies, enacted anti-terrorism legislations, and mobilised their security apparatus to counter the threat posed by terrorism. In terms of regional counterterrorism initiatives, the efforts of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), East African Community (EAC), South African Development Community (SADC), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have been significant. These regional organisations, in recognition of the fact that terrorism constitutes a threat to the political and socio-economic development of their respective entities, included counterterrorism among their programmes and plans of action.

The IGAD, for instance, has its counterterrorism pillar with main goals and activities geared towards building the national and regional capacity of countries in the Horn of Africa at countering terrorism, radicalisation, and extremist violence. It partners with individual countries, the AU, and the UN among other organisations in its counterterrorism drive. There are also organisations that cut across regions such as the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) which comprise the West African states of Nigeria and Niger, the Central African states of Chad, Cameroon, South Sudan, and the Republic of Central Africa as well as the North African countries of Libya and Algeria. The Commission has been at the forefront of collaborations against terrorism in the region, and in the process, setting up joint action to curb insurgency within and across the common borders of the countries.

The AU is the umbrella body for the counterterrorism effort of African states at the continental level. From 2000 when it came into being, the AU sought to depart from the more traditional and narrow defence of the sovereignty of its predecessor, the Organization of Africa Unity, to a more pragmatic conflict resolution mechanism based on the notion that conflict within any African state could affect the whole continent (Lyman, 2008: 249–259). How far this has been achieved, and generally how the counterterrorism effort has been driven by African states remain debatable, as I will highlight in the next segment.

Counter terrorism in Africa: principles and praxis

The survey of the current trends of terrorism and the overview of counterterrorism in Africa earlier made indicate that although the two phenomena seem to dot the whole of Africa, their “contours” could be described as “high and low” or being in greater dimensions in some parts than others. In terms of counterterrorism, the degree to which initiatives have been implemented and their effectiveness vary from nation to nation and region to region depending largely on the underlying nature of the threat as well as the commitment of the country or
countries involved. In mapping the contours of the counterterrorism effort in Africa therefore, a context-specific approach that would account for case-specific or peculiarities of efforts would seem both necessary and appropriate. This will be done here by examining the cases of counterterrorism efforts at the national level using, as an example, Nigeria’s effort against Boko Haram, at the sub-regional/regional level using the efforts of countries of the Sahel region against AQIM and then, the AU initiatives at the continental level. I will finally examine the efforts of the international community, that is, global efforts at countering terrorism in Africa.

**National counter terrorism effort: Nigeria versus Boko Haram**

Nigeria’s commitment to the fight against terrorism remained mainly passive until the 2009 upsurge of Boko Haram terrorist activities that compelled the Nigerian government to deploy the military in a full-scale offensive against the sect. In July 2011, a Joint Task Force (JTF) comprising personnel of the military, intelligence, and security agencies was established in Borno State, and subsequently in the other terrorist affected states in Nigeria. This was complemented by the Civilian Joint Task Forces (CJTF), a vigilante organization established by some youths and able-bodied men to confront the activities of Boko Haram. Furthermore, two army divisions, with the name 7 Division and 8 Task Force Division Nigerian Army, were established in northeastern Nigeria to tackle the terrorists. By mid-2015, many areas of Nigeria’s territory seized by the terrorists were reclaimed through the concerted efforts of the Nigerian military, mercenaries hired by the President Jonathan’s regime, and the armed forces of Nigeria’s contiguous countries.

In terms of legislation, a Terrorism Protection Act (TPA) was enacted by Nigeria’s National Assembly in February 2011 and reviewed in June 2013 (Udeh, 2013: 307–333). In January 2011, the government appointed a Presidential Adviser on Terrorism and established a counterterrorism Centre at the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) to facilitate the implementation of counterterrorism strategy and overall coordination of government effort (Dasuki, 2014). The country’s National counterterrorism Strategy (NACTEST) was endorsed for implementation in April 2014, and the second edition released in August 2016. Also noteworthy are the bilateral and multilateral engagement efforts of the Nigerian government with organisations and partners such as the UN and the European Union (EU), with states such as the United States, United Kingdom, and France, as well as with contiguous countries of Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger (Udeh, 2013: 307–322).

An assessment of the counterterrorism posture of the Nigerian government reveals the primacy of the conventional military-centric approach, as opposed to the non-conventional approach. This is a major contradiction because countering terrorism and insurgency is essentially asymmetric warfare that can hardly be executed using the conventional approach. However, while evidence on the ground indicates a hard traditional military approach to counterterrorism, comments from the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA), that supervises the NACTEST, have often been that Nigeria was disposed to employing a soft approach to counterterrorism (Dasuki, 2014). It is further noted that the terrorists have kept changing tactics in asymmetrical warfare that has challenged the Nigerian military in terms of capacity. Onuoha observes that although the Nigerian military was able to use conventional tactics to recapture territories held by the terrorists, it has been unable to cope with the terrorists’ unconventional tactics of suicide bombings, abductions, and guerrilla attacks. Moses (2017) further questions the claims by the Nigerian government that the military has decimated Boko Haram. Also, despite notable successes, the Nigerian military has been associated with human rights abuses which have not only tended to alienate it from the public but also attracted condemnation particularly from
human right groups. The allegation of human right abuses has also made it difficult for Nigeria to procure weapons from the United States and other Western countries thereby undermining the capacity of its military in the counterterrorism campaign. In the face of seeming challenges, however, the Nigerian military through operation code-named LAFIYA DOLE and Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) collaboration, has largely constricted the Boko Haram and ISWAP fighters to their strongholds around the Sambisa Forest, Lake Chad and the Borno State border areas with neighbouring countries.

Regional effort: Sahel countries and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

In recognition of the fact that the security threat posed by AQIM in the Sahel is beyond the capacity of individual states to handle, joint counterterrorism efforts were initiated by the affected Sahel states. For instance, the leaders of Algeria, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania agreed in July 2009 to work in concert against AQIM. This led to the formulation of the Tamanrasset Plan which culminated in the setting up of a joint command centre for security, intelligence sharing, and military coordination (Hoskins, 2010). The participating countries also agreed to increase the number of security forces deployed for counterterrorism in the Sahel from 25,000 to 75,000 (Hoskins, 2010). However, this plan remains ineffective due to the sometimes fractious relations between member states.

Furthermore, in their collaboration with the international community, a joint European Union-Africa strategy was adopted in December 2007 (Rugy, 2010: 123). It was designed to promote holistic approaches to security, conflict prevention, and resolution linked to good governance and sustainable development. Similarly, the United States established the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI) in 2002 which was replaced by the Trans Sahara Counter Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI) in 2005 (Ochoche, 2006: 171). The programmes aimed to improve border control capabilities and enhance regional security among Sahel states cutting across parts of North Africa, West Africa, and Central Africa. It also provided for the training of Special Forces of West African states.

More significant perhaps is the collaboration between the Sahel countries and France which led to France launching its Plan Sahel in Mali, Mauretania, and Niger in 2008. The plan which aimed to fight terrorism and assist local development programmes was complemented with the establishment of a quick reaction force and permanent military bases at Dakar in Senegal and Libreville in Gabon (Chauzal and Damme, 2015). In 2013, France launched Operation Serval against AQIM-backed Tuareg rebels in their self-declared republic of Azawad in northern Mali. France has also been a major driver of the Sahel G-5 countries multinational military force aim to tackle Islamic militants in the Sahel (Sepgupta, 2017). The body was approved by the UN through a resolution passed on 21 July 2017. It comprises French former colonial countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The Sahel G-5 is expected to operate in coordination with French troops and the UN peace support mission in Mali known as the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). However, the effectiveness of the force could depend on the willingness of the United States to partner with France and the UN to support it financially and otherwise. This is given the initial reluctance of the United States particularly on the issue of the approval of a broad mandate for the force (Sepgupta, 2017).

The African Union counter terrorism efforts

The AU’s framework for countering terrorism is enshrined in the 1999 AU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism and its 2004 Protocol which empowers the Union’s
Peace and Security Council (PSC) to coordinate and harmonise continental efforts in the prevention and combating of international terrorism in all its aspects.24 In 2004, the AU also established the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) with a view to centralising information and research on terrorism, develop counterterrorism capacity building programmes, and provide a forum for interaction and cooperation among member states and regional mechanisms. In 2011, the AU Assembly adopted the African Model on counterterrorism to assist states to harmonise legislation on terrorism. Similar AU initiatives were undertaken in 2014 which include proposals for the establishment of a counterterrorism Fund, African anti-terrorism Model Law, and specialised joint counterterrorism units at the sub-regional levels within the framework of the African Standby Force (ASF).25 There were also proposals to enhance inter-state police cooperation, intelligence sharing, and an agreement on the convening of an annual AU Coordination Forum to coordinate efforts on countering terrorism.

Although the AU is credited with the feat of sending African peacekeepers to terrorist and insurgent prone Burundi, Côte d’Ivoire, the DRC, Somalia, and South Sudan, sometimes ahead of the UN, the organization has found it increasingly challenging to effectively implement, let alone sustain most of its lofty initiatives. The large size of the continent comprising 34 of the poorest countries in the world, weak states many of which are experiencing serious unrest, strong historical Islamic presence, and a mosaic of both traditional and clumsy post-colonial societal structures that are little understood present a set of challenges for the AU. Also, political divisions between African nations create an environment of suspicion that hinders necessary cooperation between African states and their commitment to embracing the AU’s counterterrorism policy. For instance, it took more than a decade for the Algiers Protocol to come into force, and only 15 member countries had ratified it as at early 2015 with some of the main players in the fight against terrorism in the continent such as Nigeria, Kenya, and Somalia been among those that have not (Allison, 2016). These issues, among others, prevent the AU from developing into a truly effective force.

**Global efforts at countering terrorism in Africa**

Global efforts at countering terrorism in Africa are borne out of the realization that the continent is composed of ungoverned spaces that provide safe havens for terrorists to operate with impunity. Many African states are arguably weak and unable to provide safeguards or counter the threat posed by terrorism. Africa is thus thought to provide breeding grounds for terrorists that threaten the rest of the world (Antwi-Boateng, 2017: 253–284). The impact of globalisation and advancement in Information Communication and Technology (ICT) has more than ever before connected events in Africa to the rest of the globe (Forest and Giroux, 2011: 5–17). The mass human exodus of Africans seeking opportunities in Europe, and the Western world’s search for investments and opportunities in Africa ensured that the international community could not fold their arms to the terrorism situation in Africa. To this end, countries and organisations such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, France, Germany, the EU, and the UN have, among a host of others, been active in providing military, diplomatic, economic, intelligence, law enforcement, and other lines of support to the continent.

The United States counterterrorism efforts in Africa, for example, began as far back as the 1990s in response to Al-Qaeda activities in the continent. In retaliation for the attacks on its embassies, the United States bombed a chemical plant in Sudan and subsequently conducted searches, capturing and killing alleged perpetrators of the attacks (Lyman, 2008: 249–259). The United States counterterrorism efforts in Africa became more pronounced after the September
11 attacks on the country. It combined both hard and soft approaches. In 2002, it established the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) in Djibouti. Also, as part of its Department of State’s Antiterrorism Assistance (ATA) programme, the country provides training on a wide range of disciplines, including bomb detection and crime scene investigation in countries such as Tanzania.

In countries such as Chad, Niger, and Burkina Faso, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is leading efforts to support youth empowerment through education, skills training, strengthening local governance capacity, and improving access to information thereby targeting groups most vulnerable to extremist ideologies. Similar United States’ counterterrorism projects in Africa include the counterterrorism Finance (CTF) programme which provides African nations with internal and cross-border financial investigations training and the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) which focuses on identifying critical civilian counterterrorism needs.

Generally, the United States programmes in Africa could be summed up as involving several components. These include political (led by the Department of State), economic (led by USAID), and military actions complemented by the establishment of a unified Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007 to bring together its varied security programmes in Africa. Some scholars and statesmen have however raised concerns that the new Africa Command and other United States anti-terrorism programmes signal an increased militarization of United States policy in Africa. This seems to have become apparent under the new government of President Donald Trump giving the intention of the United States to go on with the sale of Super Tucana jets to Nigeria, increased presence of Predator and Reaper drones in its military bases in Niger, special forces operations in Somalia and bomber strikes against Islamic State extremist in Libya. Clearly, the balance between soft and hard approaches as well as human as opposed to state security in countering terrorism in Africa remains a challenge. The import of all of these is that countering terrorism in Africa has been daunting, and continue to be problematic at the national, regional, continental, and global levels.

Conclusion

Terrorism visibly dominates the security landscape of Africa presenting a very potent security challenge that is both phenomenal and complex. Terrorism in Africa predates colonialism but became more pronounced in colonial and post-colonial Africa. The domestic type of terrorism appears to have had a longer history and higher occurrences than international terrorism. Even at this, globalisation has made it that events in Africa, including terrorism, resonates at the global level thereby blurring the line between domestic and international terrorism in Africa. Hence, from the 1990s when Osama bin Laden considered Africa a good ground for terrorism, the continent has not had a respite season from the threat of, and the fight against terrorism, attracting not only the concern of African states but the international community as well.

The efforts at countering terrorism in Africa have been at the levels of individual national governments, and collectively at sub-regional/regional and continental. At all of these levels, lofty schemes and programmes have been outlined. However, the commitment of African governments coupled with weak security architecture, ailing economies, political instability, and fractious relations have hampered the desired outcomes in the fight against terrorism in Africa. The African nations have had to rely on the support of the economically and technologically advanced countries including organizations such as the EU and the UN in its counterterrorism effort. This is not without its problems as more often than not, the interests of the advanced countries are brought into play.
Going forward, African countries need to individually and collectively go beyond talk-shops to build capacity and present a united front towards confronting terrorism in the continent. This is with the realisation that terrorism in one country is terrorism in all and that foreign assistance can only be effective if there is a commitment on the part of African states and their emplacement of good governance. The need to deemphasise the military-centric approach to counterterrorism, and emphasise people-centric responses based on democratic best practices, rule of law, and observance of human rights is imperative. Furthermore, is the requirement for all stakeholders, including the international community, to strengthen the AU. This is as it appears obvious that an effective continental counterterrorism framework already exists in the AU, and it is therefore up to member states and the union to implement it with the active support of the international community.

Notes
2 Some countries such as the United States and its agencies are silent on the aspect of state actors as perpetrators of terrorism. The Institute for Economics and Peace in its Global Terrorism Index also omitted state actors in its data.
3 See African Union Convention on the Prevention and Combating Terrorism Article 1 (3).
4 Ibid, Article 3 (1).
5 This resulted in the United Nations Security Council passing Resolution 1343 on 7 March imposing a new arms embargo on Liberia for supporting the RUF.
6 The ADF, LRA and ULIMO are examples as earlier mentioned in the text.
14 Ibid.
16 The reported number of deaths were: Westgate Shopping Mall (about 62), Garissa University College
(about 147), Lamu military base (3 Americans), Af-Uur military base (about 70 persons) as well as about 500 and 79 in the Mogadishu truck bombings of 2017 and 2019 respectively.


21 The emergence of the CJTF was largely due to the over-stretching of government forces and the need to defend towns and villages where there was a deficit in security coverage.

22 Interview of Freedom C. Onuoha, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for African Research Studies Abuja, on 2 June 2015.

23 For example, Amnesty International allegations of extrajudicial killings in their report Rank on Their Shoulders. Blood in Their Hands and the United States refusal to sell arms to Nigeria on claims of human right abuses by the Nigerian military that contravenes the Leahy Law.


25 Ibid.


27 Ibid.

28 For example Solomon, Lyman, Mayer and Botha whose works were cited in this chapter.

References


