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RESEARCH REPORT

Committee: Security Council (SC)

Topic: Resolving terrorism in West Africa

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Introduction

West Africa has recently emerged as one of the most volatile regions in the world for terrorist activity. In recent years, a dramatic increase has been observed in the amount of terrorist activity, due mostly in part to two rising groups in the region, the Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), with Al-Qaeda presence in the region also having an influence. These groups have escalated violence in the region, especially in nations such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria, raising questions about what measures states could take to combat this rise in terrorism. These groups often operate across porous borders, exploiting the weak governance, economies and fractured state control in the region. Furthermore, there are fears around whether the increased terrorist activity in the region could leak to bordering regions, furthering instability in Africa as a whole.

This report will help delegates understand the issue of terrorism in West Africa, where delegates should aim to find solutions to combat the accompanying violence and instability which this issue creates. Delegates must also understand the context of the issue, where political instability, long-standing ethnic tensions, land disputes, economic challenges, and a lack of opportunity for many fuel the rise of terrorism in the region. In navigating solutions to the issue, delegates should aim to find means to combat the rise of terror with educated, achievable, and just solutions that improve upon the prior failed attempts at solution in the region.

Definition of Key Terms

1. **Terrorist Organisation:** Whilst there is not a strict definition of a 'Terrorist Organisation', this chair report uses the term to refer to extremist and violent/militant groups which are recognised by a majority of countries as 'Foreign

Terrorist Groups', ' Terrorist Organisations', 'Terrorist Groups' or a state's equivalent classification.

2. **Terrorism:** Using violence or the threat of violence to create fear and intimidate a population or coerce a government to achieve political, ideological, or religious goals.
3. **Counter-Terrorism:** Measures taken to detect, respond, and combat terrorism.
4. **Insurgency:** Armed rebellion against a recognised government or authority.
5. **State fragility/instability:** Weak government institutions unable to uphold the security of the state and its people, and uphold the rule of law.
6. **Radicalisation:** The process by which an individual adopts and supports extremist ideologies, which can lead to support for terrorism and harmful acts.
7. **Cyber Terrorism:** The politically motivated use of computers and online communication to cause severe disruption or widespread fear in society.
8. **State-Sponsored Terrorism:** State-sponsored terrorism is terrorist violence carried out with the active support of national governments provided to violent non-state actors.

Background Information

Colonial and Post-Colonial context

It is important to remember the colonial history of Africa as a whole, and West Africa specifically, where in the 19th and 20th centuries it was colonised by the French, British and Portuguese Empires, with the majority of the land going under French West Africa. This region became mostly decolonised around the 1960s when the French and

British colonies were released, however only became fully decolonised in the mid-1970s with the release of the Portuguese colonies in the region. This colonial history has left many long-lasting effects, the primary one being the diverse and sometimes competing ethnic groups that are found in conflict within the hastily drawn post-colonial borders. These tensions and instabilities brought from colonialism are exploited by terrorist organisations to recruit members under the framing of their marginalisation. Furthermore, the divide between the former French and British colonies in governance and language make it difficult to coordinate counter-terrorist operations across all the varied states of the region.

Historical Conflicts

The region of West Africa has historically been struck by a plethora of conflicts, the majority of which being coups or civil wars, that have contributed to the instability, tension and marginalisation in the region which terrorist groups can and have exploited to further their operations. A few key conflicts to note;

Nigerian Civil War (1967 - 1970)

This conflict, also known as the Biafran war, saw a divide between Nigeria's federal government and the now failed secessionist state of Biafra, fueling a military conflict that led to over 1 million deaths. This conflict entrenched polarisation in Nigerian politics that stands to this day, as well as neglecting the northern region of the country, a region which has become the centre of one of the deadliest terror organisations in the region to this day, Boko Haram.

Tuareg Uprisings (1960s - 2012)

There have been a plethora of uprisings involving the Tuareg people found in the northern parts of Mali and Niger against their respective governments, with violent crisis occurring in both countries between the politically dominant south, and the repressed Tuareg north peoples, the most recent of which being the 2012

Malian crisis. This crisis led to the destabilisation and collapse of Mali's northern region allowing for the rise of multiple Islamist terrorist groups, a point which many cite as a turning point in transforming the region of the Sahel into a major frontier for terror.

Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars (1989 - 2003)

These two civil wars were heavily interconnected, influenced by attempts at the control of diamonds in the region and ethnic tensions, leading to the weakening of governance structure across the states, and destabilising other countries in the region due to the flow of arms that occurred to fuel the conflicts. This left a plethora of vulnerable youth in the region, who, now with less opportunity in their post-conflict countries, were easily susceptible to recruitment by terrorist organisations.

Spillover from the first and second Libyan Civil Wars (2011, 2014 - 2020)

Whilst Libya is not located in the region of West Africa, the major civil wars that occurred in the region over the past decades drove a flow of military equipment, and trained fighters into the Sahel and West African region as a whole. Furthermore, many Islamist groups utilised the chaos and instability which the Libyan civil wars incited in the region to expand southwards into West Africa, promoting networks which helped the establishment of ISGS and JNIM in the region.

Other Coups, Juntas and General Political Instability

As well as the above mentioned civil wars, there has been many coups and states with fractured or unstable governments that have weakened the state's capacity to combat the rise of terror in the region, these include the multiple coup d'états in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023) which have

eroded state stability and control in the region, creating vacuums of power that have facilitated the rise of terrorist organisations in the region.

Current Situation

The Geography of West Africa, and the Sahel Region

To understand the fast rise to terror in the region of West Africa, delegates must first understand the bounds of the region, and the significance of the Sahel region as a key frontier for these terrorist organisations.

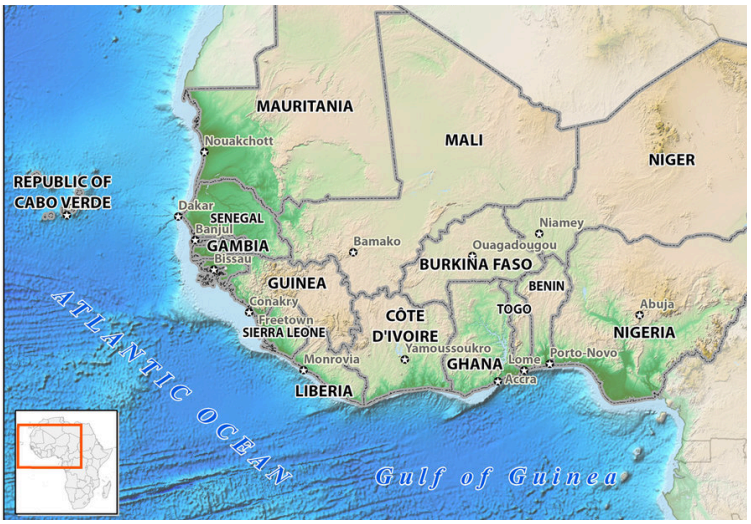

Figure 1: United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel Map of the States of West Africa. (UNOWAS, 2025).

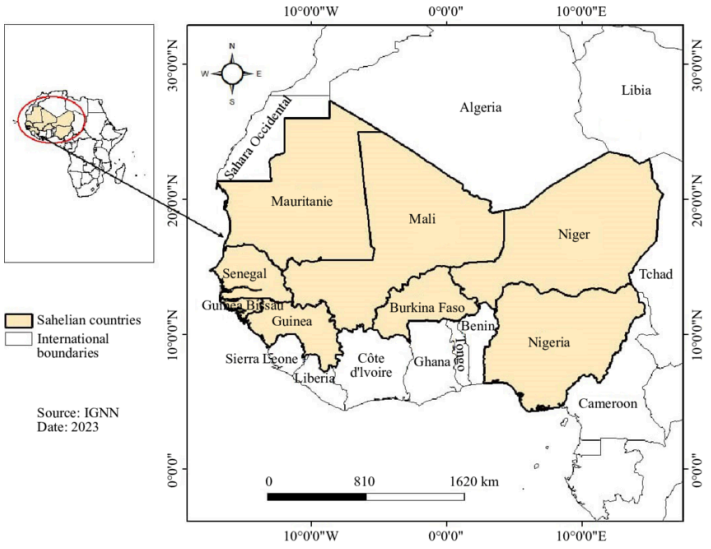

Figure 2: Map of the Sahel States contained within West Africa. (IGNN, 2023).

As seen in figure 1, The United Nations defines Western Africa as the 16 countries of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo, as well as Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha (a United Kingdom Overseas Territory). As for the Sahel Region, it is classified to its geographical position as a transition region between the humid Sudanian savannas to its south and the drier Sahara to the north. However, geopolitically, this region is one of the least developed in the world, and is rife with instability, leading to some classifying it as the epicenter of terrorist violence. Hence, the region of the Sahel contained specifically within West Africa, as seen in figure 2, is of utmost importance to consider in targeting the core of terrorism in West Africa as a whole.

The Socio-Economic and Political Situation of West Africa

West Africa as a region is currently rife with political instability, and economic challenges that allow terrorist organisations to exploit and recruit within the regions, increasing the spread of terror that has been recently observed. Despite the natural wealth that can be found in the region, leading to key industries such as agriculture, oil and gas, and mining creating some opportunities, the region still stands as one of the least developed

areas in the world. This leads to a lack of quality of life for many people in the region, with 2024's UNDP Human Development Index ranking the majority of West African countries in the lowest quarter, with around 40-45% of the population of the region living below the international poverty line.

Furthermore, the region is one of the youngest in the world, where a short lifespan leads to approximately 60% of the population of people in the region being below 25. This demographic situation, alongside the rampant poverty, income inequality, and lack of opportunity in the region, leaves many young people marginalised and unemployed. This allows terrorist organisations to easily recruit them, where they can leverage their poor situation to further their connections, operations and recruitment rapidly in the region. Furthermore, the lack of political stability in the majority of states in the region, paired with vast corruption, makes it hard for states to both tackle these socio-economic challenges, as well as to control and organise efforts to counter terrorism, further allowing the organisations to spread throughout the region.

Terrorist Organisations in West Africa

Due to all the aforementioned factors, there are a plethora of terrorist groups which have established themselves in the region, and have only continued to spread further unchecked. As mentioned earlier, the UNSC Counter Terrorism Committee claims this spread to be primarily due to two terrorist organisations, the Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Additionally, the presence of other major terrorist organisations rooted elsewhere have expanded throughout West Africa, with groups such as Al-Qaeda and its affiliates originally being limited to the extreme north of Mali, yet now expanding across large areas of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Additionally, there has been an observed growing strength of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

All of these terrorist organisations operate with violent force, creating one of the world's fastest-growing displacement crises, with the UNHCR stating that there is a record 12.7 million displaced or stateless people in the West and Central African region. This is due in part to the acts of terrorist organisations, inciting violence and instability in states that threaten the security of the people. Furthermore, these terrorist organisations can spread and work alongside other criminal networks, such as the smuggling of drugs, weapons, gold and people across the region and more notably across the Sahel, as well as exploiting the people of the region, with ransom payments from kidnapping and the illegal taxation of trade routes helping to further fund their operations. This further degrades the power and stability of the state, making it even more difficult to act against this spread of terror without significant support and supply from elsewhere.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

State Actors

These actors involve those recognised by the UN as a state, and who influence the issue by exercising their power as a state, whether it be over their sovereign territory or over other states' territory in a supporting role.

Nigeria

Located in both West Africa and the Shale, Nigeria is both a key regional power in combating terrorism, as well as being a primary target for many terrorist organisations, such as Boko - Haram and ISIS - West Africa, running rampant in the country's unstable northern and northeast regions. This state has led efforts with fellow West African states to counter terrorism, such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against terrorist organisations which it leads with Chad, Niger, Cameroon and Benin. Hence, Nigeria is evidently committed to countering

terrorism, but could struggle to do so alone due to corruption, an underfunded military and the weak governance of the state, especially in the vulnerable northeast.

Mali

Located also in both West Africa and the Shale, Mali is another key state actor in this issue. Due to the aforementioned Tuareg rebellions, and multiple coups, Mali has been a key cause in leaking this instability into the neighbouring Sahel and West African region, as the state became a base for many Al-Qaeda affiliates and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). They have attempted to fight back, where they have hosted UN peacekeeping missions and lean for alliances from P5 powers for security, although this alliance has been recently observed to have shifted from France to Russia in recent years.

France

Due to France's colonial history in West - Africa, they remain significant ties, power, and influence in the region that stands to this day. They have exercised this, though at times limited, power, to co-ordinate joint efforts against terrorism in the region, with two recent operations, Operation Serval (2013) and later Operation Barkhane (2014–2023), launched against key Jihadist groups in Mali, Niger and Chad. However, this state's role as a co-ordinator of G5 counter terrorism efforts has faltered due to the rise of another non Western aligned power in the region.

Russia

Recently, Russia has emerged as another leading power assisting Western African countries with security and counter-terrorism in the region. After coups in many of the states there, such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, western powers such as France withdrew, leaving space for Russia to step up and establish key security partnerships with the aforementioned states and more. However, some accuse their

efforts, some of which conducted through private military contractors such as the Wagner group, as focused more on regime protection than actual counter-terrorism.

Non-State Actors

These actors involve those who are not a state, whether that be Intergovernmental organisations, UN bodies or extremist groups.

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

Whilst more of an economic alliance, ECOWAS is arguably the largest and most concrete alliance that states of West Africa have to co-ordinate counter terrorism measures. The alliance is made up of almost all aforementioned West African states: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. Whilst this alliance has yet to significantly impact the terrorism challenges in the region, they are undergoing an initiative for an ECOWAS counter terrorism force which could prove promising in tackling the issue.

Al-Qaeda aligned Terrorist Organisations

Al-Qaeda has many affiliates in the region of West Africa, with the previously mentioned JNIM working to unite several Sahelian groups under Al-Qaeda's banner. They operate primarily in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, as well as having some influence which spreads to coastal West Africa.

ISIS/Islamist State Affiliated Terrorist Organisations

Working as another key driver, both directly and ideologically, for many terrorist groups in the region, the influence of ISIS aligned terrorist organisations in the region, such as their official affiliate - ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province) - and the broader and heavily significant Islamic State in the Greater

Sahara (ISGS) have spread and echoes the beliefs of ISIS throughout the region, contributing further to the rapid increase of violent terrorism in the region. Interestingly, another major terrorist organisation, the aforementioned boko haram, was previously aligned with ISIS, however a part of it split off from the affiliation, and has continued to rage rampant in the region independent from the Islamist state.

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

UN Involvement has been somewhat limited in the region, especially in response specifically to the recent rise of terror in the region, however below are some key UN bodies, and Security Council resolutions, that relate to the issue;

- **UNOCT:** Created in 2017, the United Nations Office of Counter - Terrorism and it has helped support counter terrorist operations in the Sahel region.
- **UNOWAS**: The United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel has contributed significantly to mediation, monitoring, and support for the region generally.
- **Security Council Resolution 1467 (2003):** S/RES/1467 - This resolution focused on expressing concerns of small arms trafficking and mercenary activities in the region, as well as recommending measures to West African states to help push against the issue.
- **Security Council Resolution 2195 (2014):** S/RES/2195 - This resolution focuses more on terrorism in general, with some fainter links to Africa, it focuses on recognising the links between terrorism and transnational organised crime, an issue

which (whilst not mentioned in the resolution) is linked now to the rise of terrorism in West Africa.

Possible Solutions

Severe Military Crackdown: Whilst certainly an extreme measure, a co-ordinated military crackdown on severely terrorist affected regions in West Africa co-ordinated as a joint effort between West African states and a more militarily strong third party could work to push against terrorism in West Africa. However, chances are this could lead to further pushback from terrorist organisations, and potentially destabilise the region further, hence this would only be effective as an extreme last resort.

Regional Education: Sometimes, in order to target terrorism, you must focus on the core, that being the vulnerable youth that terrorist groups exploit for recruitment. If there are efforts to improve education for this youth, by providing external support to the region to carry through with this, then the spread of terrorism in the region could be slowed, and the quality of life of the people improved overall.

Humanitarian Support: As it's very challenging to swiftly and efficiently destroy terrorism in West Africa, providing support to those affected in the region, and helping states deal with the consequences of terrorism, could work better to restore stability before any hardline attempts at attacking terrorism in the region.

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Official UN video on terrorism in west africa

How West Africa Became A Terror Hotspot (Video)

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