Expert Discussion

The Deteriorating Security Situation in West Africa: Assessing the Region's Escalating Terrorism Threat

Key Takeaways:

- Terrorist networks and actors in West Africa are exploiting local grievances to gain support for their expansion and operations, necessitating greater community defense and resilience.
- Countering the terrorist threat in West Africa will require concerted efforts at the national, regional, and international levels and entail a range of strategies that include, *inter alia*, strengthened cross-border coordination mechanisms, institution-/capacity-building, and security assistance to coastal states.
- In view of Russia's growing footprint in the region and the staying power (at least for the time being) of West African juntas, the UN and West must reconsider and find avenues for constructive engagement.
- Mounting challenges to the region's security and stability—and their implications for the African continent and beyond—merit the sustained attention of the United Nations Security Council.
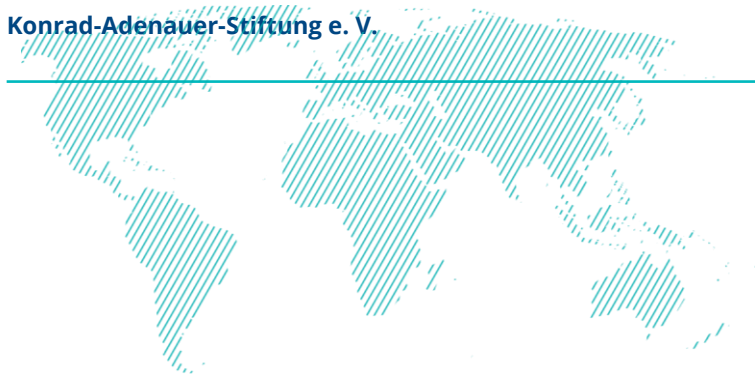
On January 30, 2024, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) New York Office and Counter Extremism Project (CEP) convened an expert discussion—bringing together representatives of the United Nations (UN) system, UN Member States, and think tanks—to exchange views on the rapidly degrading security situation in West Africa and escalating threat posed by al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) affiliates in the region. The expert discussion was convened as part of the rollout for the joint CEP-KAS project on "The Deteriorating Security Situation in West Africa," which includes a series of 12 policy papers, as well as weekly and monthly social media analyses of relevant regional actors and terrorist networks.

Over the past several years, regional dynamics have shifted considerably, exacerbating the myriad security threats and counterterrorism challenges in West Africa. Political instability—brought on by the wave of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—has raised concerns for regional counter-terrorism efforts going forward. Meanwhile, weak and disorganized security forces remain ill-equipped to address mounting security challenges, while regional security structures like the Group of Five (G5) Sahel and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) remain largely paralyzed on counterterrorism decision-making. Fueling further concern has been the UN and West's diminished presence in the region, following the end of the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and withdrawal of French troops and European Union (EU) missions from the region.

In this context, the al-Qaeda-affiliated coalition Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM) and the Islamic State (ISIS)-affiliated groups IS West Africa Province (ISWAP) and IS in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)/IS-Sahel Province have gained footholds in West Africa, steadily expanding territorial control, further weakening regional security structures, and decreasing the West's ability to engage on the ground. Below are key insights and takeaways from the discussion:

- "Localized jihad", more so than ideology, has been a driving factor behind the spread of terrorism in West Africa. Terrorist groups are opportunistically exploiting ethnic tensions and local grievances (for example, North v. South, local v. urban rivalries) to recruit people to their cause. However, one expert cautioned that terrorist networks and actors could revert to ideology as a motivator once their "expansion phase ends" and they are more established in the region. As such, it was recommended that West African states prioritize **building community defense and resilience**, as part of their broader counterterrorism strategies. For example, media literacy training was highlighted as a possible means to build community resilience against and counter widespread terrorist propaganda.

- In the absence of effective national and foreign efforts to stabilize the region, **self-defense militias have stepped in to fill the security vacuum**. Considering their increased presence and influence, it was recommended that West African states train local militias (for example, on rule of law and human rights). However, one expert cautioned that governments must also exercise oversight when relying on local militias or run the risk of inadvertently arming a coup government.

- The broader issue of **whether to rely on local militias as security providers** remains up for debate. A participant commented that the UN is unlikely to pursue capacity-building with self-defense militias and questioned whether there are alternative actors to help reinforce the security situation on the ground. However, as one expert observed, few options remain beyond West African governments and Russia (through the Wagner Group/Africa Corps); nor does there appear to be any broader trend towards diversifying, even in light of reports of Bancroft's engagement in the Central African Republic.

- The terrorist threat across West Africa carries considerable security implications that will extend beyond the region, as JNIM, ISWAP, and ISGS are strategically moving beyond their core operational areas. Accordingly, the international community must prioritize efforts to stop their southward expansion, and most importantly, **strengthen cooperation with and security assistance to those coastal states** still willing to engage. Further efforts must also be made to secure the region's vulnerable northern borders along Libya and Algeria.

- As regards regional counter-terrorism initiatives, experts called attention to the need for **strengthened cross-border coordination mechanisms** between neighboring countries and by regional security structures, such as ECOWAS. But as the military-led regimes of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have sought to distance themselves from the greater ECOWAS bloc, and in the wake of the G5 Sahel's dissolution, it was questioned how this

might materialize in a fraught and fractured environment. One expert suggested that these like-minded states might find avenues for cross-border cooperation within the breakaway Alliance of Sahel States, but this remains to be seen.

- One expert emphasized the **importance of institution- and capacity-building** as a "last hope for containment," noting that providing countries with the resources and know-how to strengthen institutions makes them "more likely to support the security institutions you do." In this regard, the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol) was identified as an ideal partner organization for West African states. Through training, workshops, and the exchange of information, Interpol can provide the technical assistance needed to address critical security challenges (for example, border security). As the expert highlighted, Interpol is also less likely to be met with pushback as an interlocutor, given its neutral and apolitical reputation.

- Experts also called attention to the **troubling linkages between terrorist groups and transnational organized crime (TOC) networks** in the region. Cooperation with TOC networks offers terrorist groups dual benefits: first, in the form of funds or materials (such as arms), and second, in the ability to further position themselves in local communities by gaining support and acceptance. Of particular concern is the fact that West Africa has emerged as the main transit hub for drug trafficking from South America to Europe, with the drug trade providing an increasingly important income stream for terrorist groups. An expert also flagged that organized crime groups in Germany are laundering their proceeds in West African coastal states. Greater efforts are needed at the national, regional, and international levels to disrupt transport routes, as well as cooperation between TOC and terrorist groups along these transport routes.

- Reflecting on how the region's coup governments have come to be and stay in power, one expert observed that much focus from the UN and the West has been on elections and the peaceful transition of power; however, from the population's perspective, these issues are beside the point. Amid rising insecurity and economic challenges, people have lost faith in the electoral process, and elections are largely seen as vehicles to put corrupt individuals in power. Military regimes are seen as the only forces capable of regaining control in these conflict-ridden countries.

- Growing frustrations with the United Nations and West—fueled in part by anti-colonial sentiment and the ineffectiveness of international interventions—have also created an **entry point for Russia to exert influence**. With the help of widespread misinformation and disinformation campaigns, Russia (through the Wagner Group/Africa Corps) is increasingly seen as a security provider and partner in the region. Meanwhile, Russia has also proactively cultivated relations with West African junta governments (for example, the recent announcement by Russia and Niger to develop military cooperation). In contrast, Europe has been largely sidelined, as it grapples with how to recalibrate its engagement in the region. As one expert illustrated, four European ambassadors in Niger have yet to present their official credentials.

- In the wake of military coups across the region, the **international community is struggling with how to engage with these juntas**. One participant asked how long they would last and whether a return to more balanced relations with the West could be expected. Several experts agreed that the West must accept the reality that junta leaders will likely stay in power for some time and must find ways to work with them.
    - Reflecting on Mali, one expert observed that delayed elections might sustain the country's current leadership for the near future, but stressed that they are running out of external forces and scapegoats to blame for Mali's mounting problems. The expert further noted that, in Mali's current "survivalist" environment, leadership has not been able to develop a long-term vision for the country.
    - In the short-term, a return to more "balanced relations" might prove challenging, particularly in Niger where lingering anti-French sentiment and misinformation and disinformation campaigns run rampant. While the current mood in Burkina Faso is not an "open" one, one expert suggested that this might be more likely, given the spiraling levels of insecurity and instability the country is facing.

- In spite of the myriad security challenges facing West Africa and the Sahel, **the region has lost visibility on the Security Council's agenda**. As one participant commented, discussions on the region have become increasingly polarized and resolutions have faced blockage from some members. Arria-formula meetings were highlighted as a useful tool in this regard, with one expert emphasizing that resolutions are not needed to raise attention on an issue.