# TERRORISM IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: CAUSES AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

## A. Introduction

Until the last two decades Sub-Saharan Africa was not known to have transnational terrorist organizations. There were several rebel movements across the continent but they were all basically in-country dissident groups. The trend has changed, and over the last few years there has been a sharp rise in terrorism especially in Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Chad, Cameroun, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda and Kenya.

The decision by the United States to create AFRICOM, a separate military command in Africa, as a stand-by military force is the clearest indication that Africa is now considered an area with growing terrorist threats and attacks. These threats and attacks highlight the security concerns currently unfolding in some African countries.

In March this year the terrorist group, Al-Shabaab, which is based in Somalia, carried out what may pass as its worst attack in Kenya when it went on a shooting rampage at the Garissa University College, killing about hundred and forty-eight (148) of the country's brightest young people. The group has for many years terrorised the people of Kenya with bombings in different parts of the country.

For a number of years Boko Haram, an equally brutal terror group, has been kidnapping and killing hundreds of people in its base in north-eastern Nigeria as well as in neighbouring Niger, Chad and Cameroun. This has raised concerns that if the group is not checkmated, they could rapidly spread their tentacles to other countries within the West and Central Africa sub-regions.

Increasingly, these two burgeoning terrorist organizations, Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram, are sending signals to other countries that they can export their violence to those countries and disturb the peace that those countries and Africa as a whole currently enjoy.

Tuareg rebels from the Maghreb and northern Mali supported by Islamists, including Boko Haram, took control of northern Mali in early 2012, declared it a separate state they named Azawad, and started advancing towards the capital, Bamako, killing and destroying property and instituting harsh practices which they described as Islamic as they advanced. The instability it engendered led to a military coup. It took the intervention of Malian troops, troops from some ECOWAS and other African countries, troops from non-African countries, and French troops in particular in 2013 before this Tuareg and Islamist insurgency was defeated. But before they could be dislodged, the Tuaregs and Islamists destroyed many historic buildings and manuscripts in Timbuktu, the historic centre of learning of the old Mali Empire.

Another terrorist group worthy of note is the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) under the leadership of the infamous Joseph Kony. Although a relatively marginal militia group, they have for a long time carried out mass abductions, massacres, and maiming of civilians in Uganda and neighbouring East and Central African countries; and it has been notorious for using child soldiers.

The terrorist attacks of these four groups have often resulted in mass displacements and consequently created humanitarian crises.

The Ghana Growth and Development Platform (GGDP) believes that the scourge of terrorism poses a serious threat to human security, and economic growth and development, so African governments individually and collectively need to take bold and decisive steps in fighting it.

## B. Causes

### 1. Economic and Social Factors

High rates of unemployment, particularly among the youth, corruption and economic mismanagement create conditions that lead to economic crises and instability which make it easier to recruit the youth into terrorist cells.

Unemployment creates conditions of hopelessness and desperation, and these then become major factors that terrorist groups feed off for radicalization and recruitment.

These economic and social conditions have enabled terrorist organizations such as Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram to grow and strengthen their power bases. The Tuareg rebels and supporting Islamists too fed off these conditions to grow until Malian troops and foreign troops, particularly from France, were able to defeat them in 2013; and the LRA too did so until the campaign against it became largely successful by about 2005, leaving it a small and weakened group with its leader under indictment by the International Criminal Court.

### 2. Weak Governments and the Phenomenon of Failed States in Sub-Saharan Africa

The fragility of certain Sub-Saharan African countries stemming from political factor such as instability, weak governance institutions, lack of transparency, weak political parties, bad leadership, and lawlessness have resulted in governments being weakened.[1]

The economic and social factors of corruption, high rates of unemployment, economic mismanagement, hopelessness and desperation have also weakened governments.

The United States-based think-tank Fund for Peace[2] has since 2004 been ranking countries according to their level of stability and the pressures that confront them. Known as the Fragile States Index (formerly Failed States Index) the internationally-recognised ranking used the following indicators:

- **Social Indicators:** Demographic pressures, refugees and internally displaced persons, group grievance, human flight and brain drain, uneven economic development, poverty and economic decline.
- **Political and Military Indicators:** State legitimacy, public services, human rights and rule of law, security apparatus, factionalized elites and external intervention.

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[1] Extreme weather conditions too have weakened and made some governments vulnerable.
[2] See: www.fundforpeace.org

It is instructive to note that according to the 2015 FFP rankings, seven out of the ten most fragile states in the world can be found in Sub-Saharan Africa. The countries are: South Sudan, Somalia, Central African Republic, Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Chad and Guinea.

In order words, weak economic and social conditions result in weak political conditions which in turn give rise to the phenomenon of fragile or failed states in Sub-Saharan Africa.

### 3. Religious Radicalization

All four terrorist groups, the Tuareg rebels supported by Islamists, Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and the LRA, have used religion and religious arguments for establishing themselves and as tools for organizing.

For the Tuareg rebels and supporting Islamists, Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram, this derives from Islamic activism which is largely driven by feverish competition among sects within Islam. These sects often receive financial and other support from Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other countries.

Competing historical and ideological narratives have been used by the leaders of the sects to proselytize, radicalize and actively recruit mostly disgruntled and unemployed young people.

The word 'Jihad' – a holy war – is often used animatedly to proselytize, with the underlying argument being that Islam is under attack by "infidels" and needs a 'jihadist' response. But these interpretations of the concept of 'jihad' by poorly educated and ideologically motivated clerics, recruiters and leaders are often warped, leading to terrorism that maims and kills innocent people, animals, and destroys properties and communities.

Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram have been organized and have grown in strength by these means of Islamic radicalization, and they have committed these sorts of acts of terror.

In effect Islam is under attack by elements within who are the radicalized minority extremists, and they through violence and terrorism have been tarnishing the image of Islam, an otherwise peaceful religion.

The LRA started out as the Holy Spirit Movement with a mission of liberating Uganda and instituting a rule under the biblical Ten Commandments.

In other words, religious extremism instead of national separatism has been the main driver of terrorism in recent years in some Sub-Saharan African countries and areas.

### C. Conclusions

Therefore, our main argument is that terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa, as currently perpetrated by Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram, has been growing on account of governments being weak and states having failed due to weak economic, social and political conditions, which in turn have created a fertile ground for Islamic radicalization by these terrorist organizations. There is a correlation between the phenomenon of failed or fragile states and the growth of terrorism.

As terrorism can gain a foothold where states are weak and cannot militarily defend themselves within their territorial borders, it is important to underscore the fact that, even if they could defend themselves, it's good governance that will act as the best insulator against the recruitment and radicalization of young people into terrorist cells. African leaders must thus commit themselves to fight terrorism by essentially governing well.

It appears that one of the unintended outcomes of the 'Arab spring' revolutions in North Africa, particularly in Libya, has been the movement of arms and ammunition which have become sources of supply for Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab, and which became sources of supply for the Tuareg rebels and the Islamists that supported them.

## D. Recommendations: Possible Solutions

The GGDP calls for the broadening of the discourse on terrorism and a thorough analysis of the entire political economy of terrorism. We believe the fight against terrorism cannot be won by a single government or agency, but requires collaboration and coordination of strategies from a wide range of national, regional and international organizations.

We strongly believe the immediate and imminent terrorist threats and attacks from Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab and others need to be confronted and eliminated through the adoption of policies and measures that address radicalism and the spread of terrorism. This can be achieved in the following ways:

1. Good governance is essential in the fight against terrorism. It is central to the effective administration of state resources, development of strong civil society and the rule of law. It is only when these are in place that the war on terrorism can be won.

2. All African governments should implement massive plans that would grow and develop all sectors of the economy – agriculture, industry, and services – by providing the education that the economy needs for growth and development, as economic growth and development will increase employment and alleviate poverty.

3. All African governments should ensure that their growth and development plans, programs and activities create employment opportunities for their youthful population, the target of militant organisations.

4. While growth, development, increase in employment and decrease in extreme poverty are important parts of a counter-terrorism strategy, special programs that are targeted at reducing the number of Africans living in volatile conditions should be implemented.

5. Diplomacy will continue to play a critical role in winning the fight against terrorism and should therefore be used seriously. Admittedly, it might be too late for diplomacy in fighting certain terrorist groups but this should always be a card on the table.

6. The majority of Muslims who are peace loving and understand the true interpretation of the Quran need to be a lot more vocal and take a stand against growing radicalization in Islam. Muslim clerics and imams should make it a point to guard their faithful against criminal elements and extremists who seek to radicalize them.

7. In many African countries, there are reports of reinvigorated religious activity supported from abroad, particularly from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Much of this is in the form of building mosques, providing for the personal needs of imams and clerics, and developing Islamic social and welfare organizations. These are normal and respectable activities often carried out by religious NGOs. But if the experience of Kenya, Somalia, and other

countries is any guide, these activities can also provide cover and openings for radical influences. Governments should thus regulate these activities of religious NGOs and others that are supported by foreign countries, especially countries known for sponsoring terrorism around the world.

8.  The African Union (AU) has to be stern and consistent in reminding authoritarian regimes in Africa that ethnic and sectarian discrimination, political exclusion and religious intolerance are unsustainable and must be stopped.

9.  The AU should lead the fight against terrorism through the creation of a dedicated intelligence unit that understands the African terrain and the dynamics of the situation at regional, national and international levels, and can coordinate with international partners in intelligence gathering, dissemination and use.

10. The media in Africa needs to be equipped to carry out better reports on terrorists and terrorism related activities in order better to create awareness of the present dangers posed to African countries.

11. Implementing these recommended plans, programs and activities will of course require substantial funding. The AU should therefore establish a substantial anti-terrorism fund as soon as possible.

12. The anti-terrorism fund should be used to finance an anti-terrorism unit within the AU that gathers and shares intelligence and to provide funding for anti-terrorism campaigns by member countries.

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