

25 May 2012

Terrorism in West Africa: The Anarchy That Hasn't Come

While riddled with weak states, West Africa has not become the international terrorist playground some feared it would. That does not mean warnings about extremists should be overlooked however.

By Charlie Warren for ISN

In 1994, journalist Robert Kaplan wrote a controversial *Atlantic* article, "[The Coming Anarchy](#)," warning of West Africa's ungoverned spaces, disease-ridden slums, weak borders, and impoverished masses. Kaplan declared that "we ignore this dying region at our own risk." In 2004, Douglas Farah and Richard Shultz published a *Washington Post* [op-ed](#) that picked up the argument where Kaplan had left off. West Africa had become a terrorist sanctuary. Three years after the 9/11 attacks, the authors proclaimed, "weak and corrupt governments, vast, virtually stateless stretches awash in weapons, and impoverished, largely Muslim populations make the region an ideal sanctuary...The now-identifiable presence of al Qaeda in other countries shows that these once-marginal wars and regions matter. We ignore the warnings at our peril."

History has not borne out this "coming anarchy" of terrorism, and West Africa is not rife with international extremism. Alas, the region is not beyond terrorism's grasp either. This means several longstanding arguments about extremism in West Africa need to be carefully revisited.

Global extremism versus local grievances

Conventional wisdom separates transnational, Salafist-inspired terrorists from local, politically marginal insurgents. However, the available evidence in West Africa suggests one ought to view things differently. Even the most well connected Al-Qaeda affiliate in the Sahel and West Africa, Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM), has a variety of influences. AQIM's predecessor, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, wanted to depose the Algerian government. The group officially aligned itself with Osama bin Laden in 2006 and changed its name to AQIM in 2007.

Boko Haram, a Nigerian insurrection founded by Mohammed Yusuf in 2002, has even more opaque influences. The group's actual name provides one such example. *Boko Haram* is Hausa for 'Western education is sinful,' yet the group's members seldom, if ever, use it. Adherents instead prefer *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad* ('People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad')—hardly a name conducive to the pithy labels preferred by governments or journalists alike. Northern Nigeria has also witnessed extremism in the recent past, so Boko Haram's emergence is not groundbreaking either. During the early 1980s, millenarian [uprisings](#) led by Alhaji Muhammadu Marwa (also known as "Maitatsine") left over four thousand people dead and included

some similarities to Boko Haram's rhetoric related to wealth, Western education, and the alleged graft of other northern Nigerian Muslims. Not unlike Boko Haram, Maitatsine's [revolts](#) appealed to the young, disenfranchised northern Nigerians in cities like Kano, Kaduna, and Gombe. Thirty years after those uprisings, Boko Haram has played upon distinctly local concerns—including corruption, political isolation, and northern Nigeria's relative poverty—with alarming success. While Boko Haram's aims may be unique and ever evolving, its regional and religious contexts are not.

Since 2011, however, Boko Haram's members have acquired some international practices: they recruit and deploy suicide bombers; they successfully [bombed](#) UN headquarters in Abuja; they carry out other mass casualty [attacks](#); and they are [alleged](#) to have met with, and perhaps trained under, AQIM.

Analysts have spent a great deal of time attempting to draw the line between 'Boko Haram the local insurrection' and 'Boko Haram the global extremist group.' Splinters of Boko Haram may have contacted other terrorist organizations in an effort to engage in training, but it's difficult to trace individual actions to truly coherent international ambitions. Worse still, it's a distraction. Boko Haram is better understood as a [diffuse](#) group [ill-suited](#) to international terrorist labels, including the US designation as an official [Foreign Terrorist Organization](#). The false dichotomy surrounding Boko Haram not only narrows our definition of the violent extremist sect, but it also constrains our ability to find [measured](#), evidence-based solutions.

Borders and illicit Flows

At least four cross-border flows facilitate terrorism in the region. Weapons of varying types pervade West Africa, making the tools of violent extremism readily available. Semtex explosives can be purchased, and Nigerian authorities recently [seized](#) 1,420 pounds of the material and 445 detonators. As many as [15,000](#) of Muammar Gaddafi's stock of man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) are unaccounted for; some speculate that AQIM possesses stockpiles. Although MANPADS have brought down at least [eight](#) passenger planes in Africa, small arms have led to far more casualties. Perhaps millions of Kalashnikovs flooded gun markets following the Cold War, and Boko Haram has become yet another group to use them during its hundreds of deadly attacks since 2010.

Illicit transfers of money via remittances and cash happen, and there is little capacity to monitor all transactions in largely unbanked countries. With mobile money transfers, cell phones could also send and receive illicit funds, but the services are not yet [widespread](#).

West Africa's drug smuggling routes provide opportunities for terrorist organizations to generate revenues. At least fifty tons of cocaine (worth \$2 billion in Europe) [travels](#) through West Africa per year, with over one ton heading through the 'narco-state' of Guinea-Bissau every night. Colombia's FARC and AQIM already [traffic](#) drugs across the Sahel and into Europe.

People also move across borders. Militants have [fled](#) Libya for the Sahel in large numbers. Kidnapping has proven to be a lucrative funding stream for AQIM, and they have made a business of capturing Westerners. AQIM has fetched ransoms as high as \$6 million in [one instance](#) and acquired tens of millions of dollars in kidnapping fees since 2006.

Although weak borders may aid terrorists, two distinctions are essential. Smuggling and banditry are hardly new to the region: for years illegal goods have traveled over the Nigeria-Cameroon border and similar flows cross the Nigeria-Benin border. International boundaries are not completely leaky either. West African states may not exercise a uniform rule of law along their boundaries, but they do have an intricate web of roadblocks, some [physical](#) and others more bureaucratic. Analysts should not overstate Africa's porous boundaries.

Political instability and terrorism

West Africa's poverty and crime have preoccupied policymakers concerned with terrorism, but few have examined the role of political instability. The relationships between terrorism and a more common scourge in the region—electoral violence—are not well known. However, one can reason that prolonged election conflicts could create space for terrorist groups in more stable countries or, at the very least, distract politicians and security services. Nigeria's tragic post-election [violence](#) of April 2011 provides one possible example. The strife thankfully stopped short of prolonged conflict, but it did sidetrack diplomatic approaches to handling Boko Haram.

Although scholars have not tested the relationship between electoral strife and terrorism, *coups d'état* and terrorism may have some connections. Recent anecdotal evidence from Mali and Guinea-Bissau suggest that coups can help terrorists. Mali's March 22 overthrow of President Amadou Toumani Touré's government was not a one-off event but rather the culmination of a northern Tuareg rebellion. (The coup's leader, Capt. Amadou Haya Sanogo, received military [training](#) in the United States.) Evolving power struggles among the FLNA, MNLA, Ansar Eddine, AQIM, and MUJWA make Mali's future uncertain. Moreover, the coup set back counterterrorism efforts in the country, not to mention precipitated a democracy and human rights rollback. AQIM may have more [control](#) than ever before.

Meanwhile, Guinea-Bissau's April 12 coup has worsened the security situation and diverted attention away from efforts to stem a growing drug trade. (In almost 40 years since independence, no president of Guinea-Bissau has finished a continuous term in office.) While it is difficult to predict the country's future, its counternarcotics efforts show no signs of improvement in the near term.

However, if one overemphasizes the impact of recent government overthrows in West Africa, one ignores an important [trend](#). Coups have declined steadily for decades. According to the Center for Systemic Peace's [dataset](#), there were twelve successful coups in West Africa from 1980 to 1990, ten from 1990 to 2000, and six from 2000 to 2010. Africa's civil wars are also [declining](#), and the region is not predisposed to conflict.

Efforts to combat terrorism in West Africa

Many analysts perpetuate the image of West Africa as a blank slate for counterterrorism experiments. Yet efforts have been ongoing for decades, and international, regional, and local frameworks already exist. UN Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001) established the Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) in an effort to stop terrorism in all of its forms. UN Security Council Resolution 1624 (2005) is designed to improve border security and encourage member countries to submit updates to the CTC. Unfortunately, West African countries provided [irregular reports](#) to CTC and [even fewer](#) reports per UNSCR 1624.

Other policies to stop terrorism predate the UN resolutions but have proven equally ineffective. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) first addressed terrorism in its 1992 Dakar declaration, and its 1999 Algiers [agreement](#) determined to "eliminate terrorism in all its forms and manifestations." Regional groups include the West African Police Chiefs Corporation, the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism, and [ECOWAS'](#) Inter-Governmental Action Group Against Money Laundering in West Africa as well as its Committee of Chiefs of Security Service. Numerous [challenges](#) confront counterterrorism teams in West Africa, ranging from poor coordination among different bureaucracies, to limited access to INTERPOL records, to regional language barriers, to the failure to incorporate international terrorist financing regulations into local laws.

Understandably, many countries have volunteered to train West Africa's police and security services. The US-led Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership ([TSCTP](#)) provides military assistance while the

African Union's Defense and Security Division undertakes [some](#) technical evaluations; special forces from Canada and other countries have trained Malian security services in the past.

Although developing capacity among local forces may be necessary, many West Africa security services have human rights records ranging from inconsistent to abysmal. In some egregious [cases](#) of extra-judicial violence, security services' brutality may anger the same extremists that they seek to stop. More broadly, international support creates what [one analyst](#) described presciently in 2004 as "rent seeking" for counterterrorism funding: Countries depict themselves as victims of transnational extremism—not local terrorism—with the hope of receiving increased aid flows in return. When the Nigerian government depicts Boko Haram as an '[international](#)' terrorist organization in letters to foreign governments, it really seeks security aid and counterterrorism funding.

Despite reasonable evidence to the contrary—terrorist groups have diverse influences, weak borders are never totally porous, political instability may influence terrorism in complex ways, and security solutions can backfire—elements of Kaplan's argument persist. In March 2012, *New York Times* Africa correspondent Jeffrey Gettleman wrote a book review entitled "[Africa's Dirty Wars](#)." Gettleman described most African rebels as "thugs" but positioned Boko Haram as a global threat. He further cautioned that "some of the most organized, disciplined, and ideologically sophisticated rebels are the Islamist extremists." However, after decades of similar warnings, the "coming anarchy" of international terrorism has yet to arrive in West Africa. There is good reason to believe that it never will.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[The Power of Regional Economic Communities
Toward a Common ECOWAS Agenda on Security Sector Reform
West Africa: Governance and Security in a Changing Region](#)

For more information on issues and events that shape our world please visit the ISN's featured [editorial content](#) and the [ISN Blog](#).

Charlie Warren is a research associate at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Publisher

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

Creative Commons - Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported

ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland