

## *Critical Perspectives on Transnational Criminality in West Africa*

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Transnational criminal groups have carved out parts of the Sahel as their domain and joined forces with their networks to undermine and threaten security in those areas. United by their facade to impose Sharia law and establish a caliphate in their spheres of influence, these groups have declared local and international interests as their main targets. This article seeks to basically unpack the critical dynamics that have contributed to the expansion of transnational criminality and the differentiated impacts on the region and foreign interests.

### **How do Domestic Threats Transform into Transnational Threats?**

This section seeks to provide a framework for understanding the factors that have facilitated the capacity of Islamist militant and other criminal groups to transform into transnational groups.

*Ethnic and regional networks*

In spite of the successive attempts to crack down on the operations of violent Islamist groups in the Sahel, these groups are successfully forging local and regional alliances with other radical groups and support networks in state institutions, local communities, criminal gangs, and financiers in order to expand their criminal activities. Partnerships exist between radical groups and their support networks at two levels: (a) there are temporary and opportunistic alliances among militant groups and criminal gangs to challenge the state, and (b) radical groups have connections with local and international networks and in some cases political actors and state officials in order to facilitate their activities.<sup>1</sup>

There are deepening and widening operational relationships among militant groups that involve the exchange of intelligence, resources, arms and weapons, safe havens and protection for the gains from the criminal economy. Boko Haram (meaning Western Education is Sinful”) in northeastern Nigeria, for instance, has ties with other radical Islamist groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Al Shabaab in Somalia. These groups provide Boko Haram with funding and training support. Funding from some of these salafi jihadist groups such as AQIM and an Islamic group - MusilimiYaa’Maa – based in Algeria has helped Boko Haram to sustain its existence and operations.<sup>2</sup> Boko Haram fighters are believed to have been trained by and provided logistical support to AQIM members in both Algeria and Mali, while the group’s members are reported to have fought alongside AQIM and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA – an offshoot of AQIM) in northern Mali.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Kwesi Aning and Lydia Amedzrator, “Security in the Sahel: Linking the Atlantic to the Mediterranean,” in *Transatlantic Security from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa*, edited by Riccardo Alcaro (Rome: IAI, 2014): [http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iairp\\_12.pdf](http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iairp_12.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> See Freedom C. Onuoha C. *A danger not to Nigeria alone – Boko Haram’s transnational reach and regional responses* (Abuja: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, November 2014):<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/nigeria/11066.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> See Kacper Rekawek, “Terrorism in the Sahel in a global context: Dismantling the narrative of ‘Afghanistan’,” in *Re-Mapping the Sahel: transnational security challenges and international responses* (Paris: European Union Institute of Security Studies, 2014): [http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Report\\_19\\_Sahel.pdf](http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Report_19_Sahel.pdf).

Additionally, Boko Haram's splinter group, Ansaru, are believed to have collaborated with AQIM by allowing the group to execute its kidnapping activities in areas regarded as the turf of the jihadist groups in Nigeria, for an agreed share of the spoils arising out of ransoms paid for kidnapped victims.<sup>4</sup> What one is witnessing in the region are mutually beneficial relationships between the militant groups and their financiers. These financiers are primarily businessmen, arms traffickers and kidnapers who raise money through kidnapping foreigners and trafficking of weapons.<sup>5</sup> Narcotics traffickers are also believed to have established opportunistic ties and sometimes funded militant groups such as AQIM in order to protect their trafficking business and facilitate their gains from hostage taking for ransom.<sup>6</sup> Boko Haram, as well, is reportedly supported through diverse sources of funding, including membership dues from wealthy, educated and influential people; donations from politicians; financial assistance from foreign terrorist groups; raiding of banks; ransoms from kidnapping; extortion of money from residents in areas under its control and from wealthy people who are intimidated into paying protection fees to avoid being attacked by the group.<sup>7</sup> It is reported that Boko Haram's major financiers are from Borno and bordering areas of Cameroon's Extreme North Region and are often ethnic Kanuris.<sup>8</sup> Through their interdependent activities, underpinned by their use of violent attacks in the region, these groups have demonstrated their firm intention to establish a caliphate, expand their influence beyond their operational areas and hopefully forge ties with other criminal groups in neighbouring countries in the region.

Criminal and radical groups have established reciprocal ties with the local populations in order to consolidate the gains from an emerging criminal economy through kidnapping, hostage taking, smuggling of contraband goods and tax collection from smugglers. These gains facilitate their activities. AQIM, for instance, has exploited

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram: Recruitment, financing, and Arms Trafficking in the Lake Chad Region," *CTC Sentinel*, 2014, pp. 5-9: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/boko-haram-recruitment-financing-and-arms-trafficking-in-the-lake-chad-region>.

<sup>6</sup> See Mathieu Pellerin, "Narcoterrorism: Beyond the myth," in *Re-Mapping the Sahel: transnational security challenges and international responses* (Paris: European Union Institute of Security Studies, 2014): [http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Report\\_19\\_Sahel.pdf](http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Report_19_Sahel.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> See Freedom C. Onuoha, "Why Do Youth Join Boko Haram?" United States Institute of Peace *Special Report* (June 2014): [http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR348-Why\\_do\\_Youth\\_Join\\_Boko\\_Haram.pdf](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR348-Why_do_Youth_Join_Boko_Haram.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Zenn, "Boko Haram."

its ethnic affiliations with rebel groups operating in the Sahel, such as Mali's Ansar Dine, to expand its activities. The intensification of attacks by Boko Haram in the northeastern part of Nigeria and the audacity with which these militants are able to perpetrate attacks, particularly in the countries in the Lake Chad Basin, for example, is illustrative of its ability to craft ethnic and regional cross-border ties particularly with the "Sunni Muslim cohesion of Kanuri, Hausa, and Shuwa Arab groups that transcend national boundaries in the Sahel."<sup>9</sup> Mokhtar Belmokhtar, former leader of AQIM who hived off in 2012 to form the Al-Mulathameen ("Masked") Brigade, supported local smuggling networks with armed protection for their convoys, in exchange for intelligence from smugglers who know the population and territory.<sup>10</sup> These radical groups connect to the local population, gaining loyalty and support by using marriage ties, close cultural affinities, religion, skin color and the exploitation of the radical group's superior economic power to purchase goods. The interlocking networks of extremist and criminal groups, and local communities, support one another. There is a reciprocal expectation of what each group can bring to the benefit of others, in terms of financial inducement; information on tourists and their movements, nationalities for possible kidnap and ransom demands, law enforcement agencies and the availability of safe houses; intelligence gathering and sharing; guiding traffickers across the desert; providing fuelling facilities; and, in some instances, conniving with law enforcement agencies and sharing local knowledge of routes and oases, protective cover for militants to shelter, launch attacks among civilians, and prevent their activities from being easily detected, intercepted and disrupted by national and international law enforcement agencies. By providing information that can be used to attack international interests, for example, a local in Mali can earn around €750.<sup>11</sup> In a country where the minimum wage is less than €50 a month, the temptation to join forces with AQIM can be considerable.<sup>12</sup> These ethnic ties with the local population across borders provide the social capital for criminal and radical networks to extend their activities to other countries, facilitates

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<sup>9</sup> See Scott Menner, "Boko Haram's Regional Cross-Border Activities." *CTC Sentinel* (October 2014): pp. 10-14: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/boko-harams-regional-cross-border-activities>.

<sup>10</sup> Pellerin, "Narcoterrorism."

<sup>11</sup> See Sergei Boeke, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, insurgency, or organized crime?" *Small Arms & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2016): pp. 914-936.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

adaptability of these criminal gangs and enables them to recruit fighters and collaborators.

These two forms of mutual partnerships among terrorists, criminals and their local networks are reinforced by support from political actors. This support base has facilitated the expansion of criminal and terrorist acts without disruption by national and international actors. Temporary alliances among militant and criminal groups may also be enhanced by protective relationships with the top hierarchy of the military, intelligence services, police and customs and civil servants, who facilitate the movement of goods. In northern Mali, for instance, it is argued that no illicit trafficking takes place without the association of local tribal groups, and some local state officials and civil servants are also believed to be complicit in the trafficking business.<sup>13</sup> With the involvement of regular armed forces and northern state officials, drug trafficking networks in Mali are organized such that one team in northern Mali receives the merchandise from Latin America, and another team takes it on to Europe.<sup>14</sup> State complicity with organized crime is believed to have contributed to the economic and military influence of radical groups in the region. The net negative effect of political collusion with criminal gangs has perpetuated a vulnerable condition for radical groups' capacity to operate on a transnational scale. Boko Haram especially has cooperated with several rogue customs officers in northeastern Nigeria, who turn a blind eye to cross-border arms trafficking because they (or their families) are threatened or bribed by Boko Haram, or sympathize with its ideology.<sup>15</sup> In other cases, a symbiotic relationship has developed and deepened over time, where state actors become the initiators and conduits of investments in (or are in a close dependent relationship with) criminal enterprises. Such symbiotic relationships result in a mutually beneficial partnership to the extent that instead of being bribed, persuaded or threatened by criminal groups to allow their activities to continue or turn a blind eye, state officials motivated by their personal interests ensure that such activities continue unchecked.<sup>16</sup> The net effect of these ethnic and regional networks of Boko Haram has potentially

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<sup>13</sup> See Kalilou Sidibe, "Criminal Networks and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms in Northern Mali," *IDS Bulletin* 43, no. 4 (2012): pp. 74-88

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Onuoha, "Why Do Youth Join Boko Haram?"

<sup>16</sup> See Rachel Locke, *Organized Crime, Conflict, and Fragility: A New Approach* (New York: International Peace Institute, July 2012).

paved the way for the increase in the level of lethal attacks in the group's operational areas. These networks have also supported the group to infiltrate other states, gain territory and in some instances popular legitimacy that are challenging the authority of states in the region.

### *Binding ideology*

Militant groups in the region are united by their desire to impose Sharia law in their operational areas in order to 'cure' the perceived ills in society including immorality and corruption by government. Correspondingly, the Islamist militant groups have declared political rulers, Islamic scholars, traditional and religious leaders and even the general population, including Muslims who support or work for the government, and nationals of western nations as apostates or infidels and legitimate targets of jihad.<sup>17</sup> Aside from its religious message, Boko Haram for instance has tapped into the grievances of the majority-Muslim population in the north, who feel marginalized by the Christian dominated government from the south and see themselves as victims of social inequality and economic underdevelopment.<sup>18</sup> This resentment resonates with sections of the Muslim population in the Sahel who are particularly frustrated by widespread poverty and perceived marginalization of Muslim communities. In almost every country in the Sahel, there is Muslim resentment of domination by those elites, whether they are from a Christian majority, or Muslim (usually Sufi) majority.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, militant groups have taken advantage of the weakness of neighbouring states, which are mostly divided along religious lines. These groups have successfully exploited the security campaigns by Nigeria and its neighbours which have been marred by abuses against civilians and detainees to fuel

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<sup>17</sup> See Abdulbasit Kassim, "Defining and Understanding the Religious Philosophy of jihadi-Salafism and the Ideology of Boko Haram," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 16, nos. 2-3 (2015): pp. 173-200.

<sup>18</sup> See IISS, "Extremism spreads across West Africa and the Sahel," *Strategic Comments* 18, no. 8 (2012): pp. 1-3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

their politics of victimhood of the Muslim population.<sup>20</sup> These abuses have served their strategic propaganda and provided some degree of sympathy and legitimacy to the group's 'jihad' across parts of West Africa and the Sahel.<sup>21</sup> Boko Haram has had a substantial ideological impact in Cameroon, and to a lesser extent in Niger and Chad. The similarities between the Muslim communities of Nigeria and Cameroon, where there is a comparable north-south divide have facilitated the infiltration of Nigerian Islamic extremists into mosques in Cameroon.<sup>22</sup>

To execute their military agenda, Boko Haram and AQIM especially have engaged in religious indoctrination by using religious leaders to preach their brand of Islam. Writings and multimedia messages by leading members of these groups are also intended to promote the image of the militant groups as a vanguard fighting to defend the Muslim population.<sup>23</sup> This has been facilitated by the increasing number of people assessing terrorist and extremist websites. As a result, Boko Haram in particular is able to draw members who are predominantly young people from the Yobe and Borno states, as well as from neighbouring countries such as Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.<sup>24</sup> These new recruits who previously used small arms in attacks, have become highly radicalized individuals willing to fight and die for their new cause, and to carry out suicide bombings in pursuit of martyrdom.<sup>25</sup> The rate at which "students, especially in tertiary institutions in Borno and Yobe states, withdrew from school, tore up their certificates, and joined the group" is illustrative of the reach of Boko Haram's radical ideology.<sup>26</sup> Evidently, the net effect of the propaganda by these militant groups is that they have been able to: (a) attract support from receptive audiences in their operational areas; (b) facilitate the recruitment and indoctrination of potential members; (c) elicit support from other radical Islamic groups; and (d) give intellectual weight to and legitimize their nefarious activities. For example, Boko Haram's affiliation with the global jihadist Salafist movements has contributed to the resilience, adaptability, and

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<sup>20</sup> See Alex Thurston, *The disease is Unbelief: Boko Haram's religious and political worldview*, The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World (no. 22, January 2016): [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Brookings-Analysis-Paper\\_Alex-Thurston\\_Final\\_Web.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Brookings-Analysis-Paper_Alex-Thurston_Final_Web.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Onuoha, *A danger not to Nigeria alone*.

<sup>22</sup> IISS *Strategic Comments*.

<sup>23</sup> Kassim, "Defining and Understanding the Religious Philosophy of jihadi-Salafism."

<sup>24</sup> Onuoha, "Why Do Youth Join Boko Haram?"

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



survivability of the group.<sup>27</sup> Boko Haram is now able to attract support from these radical groups in the form of weapons, funds, and ideas which helps the group to perpetrate audacious attacks. This explains why, though the Multinational Joint Task Force in 2015 dislodged the group from its domain in the Sambisa forest and the northeastern Nigerian towns it controlled, Boko Haram was able to respond with a new wave of rural massacres and suicide bombings, including bombings in Chad's capital N'Djamena.<sup>28</sup> Boko Haram's affiliation with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) especially has facilitated the resilience of the group. There appears to be a tactical semblance between the activities of ISIS and Boko Haram, and a secure IT network between both groups helps Boko Haram to receive crude information. The dividend of this "mutually beneficial relationship" is reflected in the packaging and quality of video and audio tapes by Boko Haram with sweet background music. Similar to what ISIS does, Boko Haram now engages in audacious attacks such as beheadings, movement in convoy to celebrate victories, and brutal killing of captives who are shot and thrown into water for the propaganda value. Apart from Boko Haram, there is a plethora of armed factions including criminal enterprises, Tuareg separatists, government aligned militias, and several groups that espouse a Salafist-jihadist agenda.<sup>29</sup> AQIM for instance is expanding its activities across the region and improving its ideal of regional jihad. AQIM sees both Mali and Mauritania as regions to recruit new members and as a base from which to destabilize the region in order to gain a foothold against Western governments.<sup>30</sup>

### *Governance Deficits*

Most state institutions in the region are fragile and barely have the capacity to protect and secure their territorial borders. These under-governed areas become the incubators for criminal plans to be hatched, and the vector for where such plans are

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<sup>27</sup> Kassim, "Defining and Understanding the Religious Philosophy of jihadi-Salafism."

<sup>28</sup> Thurston, *The disease is Unbelief*.

<sup>29</sup> Boeke, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb."

<sup>30</sup> See Obi Anyadike, "Briefing: The new Jihadist strategy in the Sahel," IRIN (4 February 2016): <http://www.irinnews.org/feature/2016/02/04/briefing-new-jihadist-strategy-sahel>.



launched and perpetrated.<sup>31</sup> For instance, the 2,000-mile (or 3200 km) border which Nigeria shares with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon has almost 1,500 illegal or unmonitored crossing routes.<sup>32</sup> These porous borders have facilitated the transmission of radical ideologies, movement of foreign fighters (mercenaries), the trafficking of weapons especially small arms and light weapons which are easy to conceal, and car snatching activities which have become a major source of funding for Boko Haram in particular. More so, ungoverned spaces ranging from vast unmonitored deserts, mountain ranges, vast stretches of coastal lands and uninhabited spaces are exploited by transnational criminal groups. These groups are able to carve out these ungoverned and under-governed areas as their domain, plan and stage their operations on the periphery of these countries and collaborate with their regional networks to advance their strategic agenda. Boko Haram especially has taken advantage of the porosity of the borders in the Lake Chad basin such as northeastern Nigeria, northern Cameroon, southeastern Niger, and southwestern Chad as well as parts of Sudan and Somalia, northern Mali, southern Libya and Algeria to infiltrate these states so as to launch their operations and easily move through these grey areas to evade detection.<sup>33</sup> Boko Haram also uses these ungoverned terrains as safe havens, training and recruitment hubs for mobile fighters and for regrouping of fighters. This was confirmed by then President Goodluck Jonathan who acknowledged that Nigeria gleaned intelligence which indicated that Boko Haram runs an international network of recruitment, training and indoctrination camps in Gao and Kidal in Mali; the Diffa, Maradi and Maina Soro areas in Niger; Garoua and Maroua areas in Cameroon; the Zongo and Ridina quarters in Ndjamena, Chad; the Ranky Kotsy area in Sudan; and some cells in the Central African Republic.<sup>34</sup> While Cameroon was at first a victim of spillover violence from Nigeria and a transit state for arms trafficking, it has now become Boko Haram's rear base from which to attack neighbouring states and an arena for kidnapping-for-ransom activities.<sup>35</sup> Until the French military intervention of Operation Serval, the caves, crevices and

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<sup>31</sup> See Kwesi Aning, S.B. Kwarkye, and J. Pokoo, "A Case Study of Ghana," In *In Getting Smart and Scaling Up: Responding to the Impact of Organised Crime on Governance in Developing Countries*, edited by C. Kavanagh (New York: Center on International Cooperation, New York University, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> See Menner, "Boko Haram's Regional Cross-Border Activities."

<sup>33</sup> See Micha'el Tanchum, "Al-Qaida's West African Advance: Nigeria's Boko Haram, Mali's Touareg, and the spread of Salafi Jihadism," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2012): pp. 75-90.

<sup>34</sup> Onuoha, *A danger not to Nigeria alone*.

<sup>35</sup> Menner, "Boko Haram's Regional Cross-Border Activities."

valleys in the Adrar des Ifoghas in Mali and Algeria used as a safe haven for AQIM's operations. The use of these grey areas has contributed to the manoeuvrability and survivability of militant groups which exploit vulnerable environments in order to expand their criminal acts and weaken state structures.

### **Nature, extent and impact of criminal activities**

This section discusses the multifaceted nature, size, and impact of criminal activities which are undertaken by the multiple groups in the Sahel.

The capacity of these militant groups to successfully hit UN and government facilities killing scores of civilians, military personnel and police officers has increased.<sup>36</sup> The 2015 hotel attacks in Bamako and Ouagadougou which were specifically aimed at locations popular with foreigners have had serious implications for the tourism industry in the region. Another effect of the activities of the militant groups is the displacement of large sections of the population. This is corroborated by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre who reported that about 393,000 people were displaced since January 2012. Refugees who migrate to neighbouring countries puts strains on the economic stability and survival of the host countries.<sup>37</sup>

Kidnapping for ransom has become one of the several methods used to raise funds and court publicity. Victims have included nationals of France, Spain, Italy, Austria, Canada, Switzerland, Germany and the United Kingdom, as well as several African countries. The kidnappings were executed by a loose arrangement of a multiplicity of groups including:

- a. Local criminal groups that act as contractors and conduct kidnap operations, subsequently delivering their hostages back to extremists groups, especially AQIM leaders who are able to extract huge ransoms. The leaders of these militias also negotiate the release of hostages and collaborate with terrorists in other joint illicit trafficking operations

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<sup>36</sup> Boeke, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb."

<sup>37</sup> IISS *Strategic Comments*.

- b. Rebel groups and their local collaborators who exploit already established networks for providing information on routes, the presence of tourists, the activities of soldiers or security, a warren of safe houses and, in some instances, the connivance of law enforcement agencies, who probably take a share of the ransom payments.

The groups engaged in kidnapping and hostage-taking, particularly AQIM, have possibly received over US\$200 million in ransom payments since 2003. Payment for a Western hostage is estimated on average at US\$6.5 million. Northern Mali is largely used as an operational area for trading hostages. Actual kidnappings are carried out across the border in Niger, Mauritania, Tunisia and Algeria. Since 2003, about 63 Westerners have been kidnapped as represented in Table 1:

**Table 1.0: Size of kidnapping activities since 2003**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of hostages</b>	<b>Area of operation/ capture</b>	<b>Mode of payment</b>	<b>Country which paid ransom</b>
<b>2003</b>	32	Libya; transferred to Algeria and Mali	€5million	Germany
<b>2007</b>	4	Killed in Mauritania		
<b>2008</b>	4 (Austrians 2; Canadians 2)	Austrians in Tunisia; Canadians in Niamey, Niger	US\$2.4million; other hostages released in exchange for AQIM prisoners	Austria paid for Austrians
<b>2009</b>	11	5 in Eastern Mali; 1 in Menaka, Mali; 3 in Mauritania;	Some hostages released in exchange for AQIM's prisoners; US\$4.8 to US\$12.7	Spain (paid for the 3 Spanish hostages) No indication of ransom payment for other hostages

		2 in Mauritania	million	
<b>2010</b>	8	7 in Arlit Uranium Mines, Niger	3 released; €90 million demanded for the others	No indication of payment
<b>2011</b>	3	2 in Niamey 1 in Djanet, Algeria		No indication of payment
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>			

Though kidnapping activities have contributed to and promoted the growth of the criminal economy, it has had adverse effects on the legitimate economy, hampering for example tourism as people prefer to work in the lucrative criminal industry. Also, large numbers of undocumented workers migrate to North African countries sometimes under the protection of militant groups as tabulated below:

**Table 2.0: Size of irregular migrants in North Africa**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of migrants</b>
Libya	750,000 – 2.5 million
Algeria	230,000
Mauritania	68,000
Tunisia	35,000
Morocco	Unknown

Mutually beneficial partnerships exist among the militant groups and criminal networks who are involved in the smuggling of drugs and people which generates about US\$1 billion a year. AQIM for instance has expanded its spheres of influence to the more southern states of West Africa and transformed its operational tactics by: expanding into the drug trafficking business; illegally taxing drug smugglers; supporting the recruitment, training and radicalization of other groups; kidnapping Westerners for ransom; and assisting (for a fee) undocumented workers to migrate from the northern edge of the Savannah (Nigeria, Ghana and Burkina Faso, in particular) to intermediary Saharan cities, especially Kidal in Mali, Tamanrasset in Algeria, Agadez in Niger, and Tripoli in Libya.<sup>38</sup> It has become the trend for criminal gangs to fix associates at every level of their transaction and sometimes collaborate with the “more hierarchical, mafia-style operations of Columbian criminals.”<sup>39</sup> Militants also provide convoy protection for traffickers, guide them across the desert, and provide fuelling and water facilities. This has created a mutually beneficial collaboration leading militant groups to gain access to the weapons, funds, and personnel needed to facilitate their operations. Criminal groups also benefit from the enforcement capacity of the militants.

Militant groups have networked with South American narcotics traffickers. This has substantially improved their potential to raise income for extremist activities; enabled them to learn more professional methods of contraband transport; and provided access to light and medium weight arms that can easily be packaged along with the cocaine; given them access to vehicles and effective means of communication; enabled them to free their imprisoned members; and allowed them to remain elusive. On occasion when militant groups do not participate directly in the contraband trade, they tax smugglers who generate income from contraband goods. Militant and extremist groups provide safe passage and protection to traffickers in exchange for a percentage, about 10-15 percent of the face value of the trafficked goods.

Temporary alliances among militant groups with trans-Saharan traffickers are possibly enhanced by protective relationships with the top hierarchy of the military, intelligence services, police and customs and civil servants, who facilitate the movement

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<sup>38</sup> See Aning and Amedzator, “Security in the Sahel.”

<sup>39</sup> See UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *Transnational Organized Crime in the West African Region* (Vienna, 2005).

of goods. Irregular routes for smuggling activities across the Sahara to Europe are especially controlled by Tuareg nomads in collaboration with militants using SUVs and cell phones.

Revenues from these illicit activities have helped militant groups to become well-funded and self-sustaining. Groups are able to procure the equipment and vehicles that allow fighters to operate with a high degree of mobility and coordination in the desert, expand their fighting units, facilitate terrorist activities in their areas of operation, and perpetuate conditions of instability in which criminal activities thrive. These links and relationships among criminal and radical groups pose the most serious challenges to state survival.<sup>40</sup>

### **What response capacities exist in ECOWAS and its member states?**

This section seeks to analyze the capacity of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its member states to confront and deal with the regional security challenges discussed in the paper.

#### *The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)*

The Multinational Joint Task Force, an anti-terrorist alliance of Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon with a non-military representation from Benin, finally picked up after the 2015 Paris Conference which contributed to reducing the suspicion and mistrust among the countries in the Lake Chad Basin especially between Nigeria and Chad. Issues surrounding assistance from Chad to facilitate the rescue of 276 girls kidnapped by Boko Haram from a school in Chibok in northeastern Nigeria deepened tensions between the two countries. More so, in the past, the posturing of some of the countries in that part of the region particularly Cameroon pointed to the fact that they were not willing or able to deal with the threat from Boko Haram. After the Paris Summit however the four leaders of Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon formed a

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<sup>40</sup> See Kwesi Aning, "Potential New Hotspots for Extremism and Opportunities to Mitigate the Danger: The Case of the Sahel," Pluscarden Programme Conference (Oxford University, October 2010).

coalition to deal with the terrorist threat. These countries contributed some 8700 troops to form the MNJTF while Benin promised to send its troops which “will act as a reserve rapid intervention force and are the last from the five countries involved in the African Union-led force to be deployed.”<sup>41</sup>

The MNJTF has launched two main operations to deal with the threats from Boko Haram. The first, Operation Lafiya Dole was a minor operation targeted at finding Boko Haram members in the Sambisa forest. It succeeded and “caused a huge number of the terrorists to flee their hideout in Sambisa Forest towards Lake Chad in the northern part of Borno State on the Nigerian/Niger Republic border.”<sup>42</sup> In a statement, believed to be issued by Colonel Mohammed Dole, Chief Military Public Information Officer, cited on SaharaReporters, the current operation, operation Gama Aika “involves the MNJTF troops and national air and ground forces from Nigeria, Chad, Cameroun and Niger,” is intended to consolidate the concerted efforts from the first operation by ridding the northeastern part of Nigeria of Boko Haram militants and prevent the group from establishing other safe havens in Cameroon, Niger, and Chad. Operation Gama Aika is reported to have cleared villages along the Nigeria borders and the Lake Chad basin such as Doran Nairi, Faide-Jimba, Yebi-Tasugia, Yebi-Jemi, Alli Kanori, Yebi Tumanba and Alagarno, Littri, Madayi of Boko Haram militants.<sup>43</sup> The operation also succeeded in neutralizing 31 terrorists, seizing and destroying large quantities of equipment as well as caches of arms and ammunition, one Hilux van mounted with a 23mm Shilka anti-aircraft cannon with 97 rounds, 15 AK-47 rifles, four rocket propelled grenades, six mortar bombs, two general purpose machineguns (GPMGs), and eight bandoliers of small arms ammunition.<sup>44</sup>

In spite of these successes by the MNJTF, the force still has some challenges. A number of countries have pledged troops however the force strength remains inadequate to deal with the militants. Added to this, there are language barriers among the main troop contributing countries of Chad, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Niger. While

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<sup>41</sup> See Reuters Africa, “Benin to deploy troops to anti-Boko Haram task force,” (15 March 2016): <http://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFKCN0WH26G>.

<sup>42</sup> See Sahara Reporters, “Multinational Joint Task Force Claims Big Victories In Final Onslaught On Boko Haram,” (22 June 2016): <http://saharareporters.com/2016/06/22/multinational-joint-task-force-claims-big-victories-final-onslaught-boko-haram>.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



bilateral partners including USA, EU, and Nigeria have provided political, diplomatic and financial support, and ECOWAS has opened a trust fund for member states to contribute to the force, the MNJTF still faces funding challenges.

*Effective Counterterrorism strategy*

The ECOWAS counterterrorism strategy is overly dependent on addressing the security dimension of militancy in the region. There is the need for a multi-layered response that deals with issues of governance, institutional fragilities, and widespread poverty which have been hijacked by the militant groups to further their ends.

*Synergy among regional organizations*

Due to the transnational nature of threats posed by criminal and militant groups, ECOWAS alone cannot successfully tackle these threats. Cameroon and Chad which are not members of ECOWAS have been used as operational areas by Boko Haram in particular. ECOWAS' decisions are not binding on non-ECOWAS countries. There is need for closer collaboration with these neighbouring countries. The Lake Chad Basin commission provides an ideal platform for Nigeria and its neighbours to share ideas and take decisions on how to successfully contain the threats from militant groups.