THE RISING TRENDS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN WEST AFRICA: A THREAT TO REGIONAL SECURITY

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Abstract: The West African sub-region has witnessed an upsurge in the activities of violent extremist groups in recent years. Many extremist groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, Ansarul Islam in Burkina Faso and Mali, Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' in parts of West Africa and the Maghreb, and the Islamic State's West Africa Province, among others, have taken undue advantage of the numerous security challenges in the region to launch persistent attacks on security targets and civilians. Burkina Faso and Mali, in particular, are gradually becoming the focal points of violent activities and terrorist attacks in West Africa that have claimed the lives of security personnel and many civilians. Available data indicates that between January and March 2020, there were about 85 incidents of extremist attacks with over 438 associated deaths in Burkina Faso alone. These attacks and the resultant effects have spillover consequences for other West African states, such as Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Niger, and Togo. The Economic Community of West African States, the sub-regional body, has formulated different strategies, with the support of the international community, to nip this menace in the bud. While these strategies, without a doubt, have helped reduce the effects of the violent attacks, the trends of violent extremism and terrorist insurgency are still rising in some Western African countries. Therefore, this paper explains the increasing trends of violent extremism in West Africa and outlines the factors influencing extremism in the sub-region. The discussion also considers the responses of individual member states in the sub-region and suggests how to curb the increasing threat of violent extremism in the sub-region.

Keywords: Violent Extremism, Radicalization, West Africa, ECOWAS, the Sahel Region

BATI AFRİKA'DA ŞİDDETLİ AŞIRILIĞIN YÜKSELEN EĞİLİMLERİ: BÖLGESEL GÜVENLİĞE BİR TEHDİT

Özet: Batı Afrika alt bölgesi, son yıllarda şiddet yanlısı aşırı grupların faaliyetlerinde bir artışa tanık olmaktadır. Nijerya'da Boko Haram, Burkina Faso ve Mali'de Ansarul İslam, Batı Afrika ve Mağrip'in bazı bölgelerinde Jama'a Nusrat ul-İslam wa al-Muslimin' ve diğerlerinin yanı sıra İslam Devleti'nin Batı Afrika Eyaleti gibi birçok aşırılık yanlısı grup, güvenlik hedeflerine ve sivillere sürekli saldırılar başlatmak için bölgedeki sayısız güvenlik sorunundan yoğun bir şekilde yararlanmaktadır. Özellikle Burkina Faso ve Mali, Batı Afrika'da, güvenlik personeli ve birçok sivilin hayatına mal olan şiddet eylemlerinin ve terör saldırılarının giderek odak noktası haline gelmektedir. Mevcut veriler, 2020 yılının Ocak ve Mart ayları arasında sadece Burkina Faso'da 438'den fazla can kaybıyla birlikte, yaklaşık 85 aşırılık yanlısı saldırı olayı yaşandığını göstermektedir. Bu saldırılar ve bunların sonucunda ortaya çıkan etkiler, Benin, Fildişi Sahili, Gana, Nijer ve Togo gibi diğer Batı Afrika ülkelerine yayılma tehdidine sahiptir. Alt-bölgesel bir yapı olan Batı Afrika Devletleri Ekonomik Topluluğu, uluslararası toplumun desteğiyle bu tehdidi daha baştan ortadan kaldırmak için farklı stratejiler formüle etmiştir. Bu stratejiler, hiç şüphesiz, şiddet içeren saldırıların etkilerini azaltmaya yardımcı olsa da, bazı Batı Afrika ülkelerinde şiddet içeren aşırıcılık ve terör eylemleri hâlâ yükselmektedir. Bu nedenle, bu makale Batı Afrika'da şiddet içeren aşırıcılığın artan eğilimlerini açıklamakta ve alt bölgede aşırıcılığı etkileyen faktörleri özetlemektedir. Tartışma ayrıca, alt bölgedeki bireysel üye devletlerin tepkilerini de göz önünde bulundurmakta ve alt bölgede artan şiddet içeren aşırıcılık tehdidinin nasıl engellenebileceği konusunda önerilerde bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Şiddet İçeren Aşırıcılık, Radikalleşme, Batı Afrika, ECOWAS, Sahel Bölgesi

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Introduction

Violent extremism poses unprecedented security and humanitarian threats to societies around the globe. It does not only exert enormous pressure on the security forces of nation-states, it also causes serious human rights violations and affects the dignity of humanity across the world (Coleman et al., 2021). Since 9/11, the devastating consequences of violent extremism have been handled through the lenses of security and military theorems (Price, 2014). For instance, between 2001 and 2017, the government of the United States alone spent about 1.78 trillion dollars on the war on terror (Boyle, 2008; Wickham, 2002). Expenditure of the European Union in the fight against violent extremism had also increased from 5.7 million euros in 2002 to 93.5 million euros in 2009 (International Crisis Group, 2021). Governments are gradually beginning to recognize that increasing budgetary allocations to strengthen security measures in combating extremism will not be enough to protect all individuals from violent extremist attacks. The international landscape within which extremists operate today is dramatically different from the one the world experienced before the 9/11 attacks in the United States (Thrall and Goepner, 2017). The system is combination of complex internal and external forces driven by highly motivated social and economic conditions that create a fertile ground for extremism to flourish. While many extremist groups such as Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, and the Islamic State have adopted innovative ways to enlist and expand their base, the strategies to counter violent extremism, it would seem, have remained unchanged (Kometer, 2004). There is, thus, an urgent need for a strategic rethinking by global leaders.

The West African sub-region has witnessed an upsurge in the activities of violent extremist groups in recent years. The term West Africa, as used in this paper, refers to the western part of Africa, which comprises (in no particular order) Benin, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Cabo Verde, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, The Gambia, Guinea, Liberia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Togo (see figure 1). Many extremist groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, Ansarul Islam in Burkina Faso and Mali, Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' in parts of West Africa and the Maghreb, and the Islamic State's West Africa Province, among others, have taken undue advantage of the numerous security challenges in the region to launch persistent attacks on security targets and civilians. Burkina Faso and Mali, in particular, are gradually becoming (or have already become) the focal points of violent activities and terrorist attacks in West Africa that have claimed the lives of security personnel and many civilians (Demuynck, 2021). Available data indicates that between January and March 2020, there were about 85 incidents of extremist attacks with over 438 associated deaths in Burkina Faso alone (Barkindo, 2020). These attacks and the resultant effects have spillover consequences for other West African states, such as Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Niger, and Togo.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the sub-regional body, has formulated many strategies to nip this menace in the bud (CGCC, 2013). While these strategies, without a doubt, have helped reduce the effects of the violent attacks, the trends of violent extremism and terrorist insurgency are still rising in some Western African countries. There is no one-size-fit-all solution for a problem of this magnitude. Mapping out strategic security measures to counter the menace is significant but not enough. Security solutions do not often focus on addressing many of the taproots that breed violent extremism (Lord et al., 2009). Therefore, this

paper explains the increasing trends of violent extremism in West Africa and outlines the factors influencing extremism in the sub-region. The paper also considers the responses of individual member states in the sub-region and suggests how to curb the increasing threat of violent extremism in the sub-region. The paper is in different sections. The first section gives an outline of the methodology adopted for the discussion. The second section of examines literature on the emergence of violent extremism and some terminologies associated with the duo concepts of terrorism and violent extremism. The third section analyses the emerging trends of violent extremism in selected countries in West Africa, highlighting the root drivers of extremism and their economic and security implications. Based on the analysis in section three, the fourth section will highlight the current strategies adopted by the regional leadership to combat violent extremism. This section also demonstrates what needs to change to prevent violent extremism from further destabilizing in the sub-region. The concluding section summarizes the salient points of the discussion.

Figure 1: The countries of western Africa. Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.

1. A Note on Methodology

The discussion in this paper is qualitative in nature and adopts analytical, comparative, descriptive, and historical tools to examine the recent trends of violent extremism in West Africa. It is a remote-based content analysis of both primary and secondary sources such as government publications, scholarly articles, books, existing public information, and media analyses on the subject matter. The paper adopts an exploratory analytical framework as the tool of the investigation. The aim is to discover and make assessable to readers a body of knowledge in the area of violent extremism in the sub-region. The objective of exploratory research is to formulate and investigate a research problem that is not clearly defined. This method is used for an investigation, which is more precise, for a better appreciation of the existing problem, and for clarification of concepts and priorities to develop hypotheses for further research.

2. Literature Review

One of the most antagonizing challenges to global peace today "is the expanding reach and destabilizing impact of violent extremism," especially in the western part of Africa (Lindborg, 2016). This short review of literature focuses on the emergence of the term "violent extremism." That is meant to help put the entire discussion in context. According to the Australian National Counter-Terrorism Committee Framework, violent extremism is "a willingness to use or support the use of violence to further particular beliefs, including those of a political, social or ideological nature. This may include acts of terrorism" (Living Safe Together, n.d.:1). This definition emanated from deliberations after the 7 July 2005 bombings in London. Nearly a month after the London bombing, as indicated by Nasser-Eddine et al. (2011), there was a special emergency meeting in Tampa, Florida, to discuss a new approach to countering terrorism. Membership consisted of directors of the intelligence unit and Special Force Commanders of the US and other allies of the United States. Fox (2005: 15) asserts that after that meeting, the global War on Terror (GWOT) was to be replaced by Struggle Against Violent Extremism (SAVE).

Several terminologies are associated with "violent extremism" and "terrorism." Understanding some of these terminologies could help develop deep knowledge of the activities of the extremists. They include counter-radicalization, violent extremism, de-radicalization, extremism, ideology, insurgent, Islamism, radicalization, terrorism, and resilience. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "extremism" as a "belief in and support for ideas that are very far from what most people consider correct or reasonable." Therefore, "extremism" can be associated with behaviours, conducts, or attitudes that are considered outside the accepted standards, models, or norms. This lexical understanding of extremism "highlights the inherently subjective nature of the term, which can take on different meanings depending on who defines the norm and decides what is acceptable or not accordingly" (UNESCO, 2017: 19). When used within the context of "violent extremism", the term "radicalization" can be highly debatable. Lexically to be "radical" is to go far beyond the norm. Politically, however, "radical" represents the desire to introduce fundamental changes to political thought. In the context of "violent extremism", "radicalization" connotes "the processes by which a person adopts extreme views or practices to the point of legitimizing the use of violence" (Jamieson and Flint, 2015). "Resilience" is seen, generally, as the ability of an individual to recover readily from adversity, depression, or the like. When situated within the context of violent extremism, the term demonstrates "the ability to resist – or not adhere to – views and opinions that portray the world in exclusive truths, which legitimize hatred and the use of violence" (UNESCO, 2017: 20).

Some writers distinguish between "terrorism" and "violent extremism" (see Abbas, 2019; Basit, 2021; Bergin and Hately, 2015; Lake, 2002; Mroz (2009b). For Lake (2002:26), the borderline revolves around the aim and the purpose for which those activities are carried out. While "violent extremism is to provoke the target into a disproportionate response … the purpose of terrorism is to endogenise the capabilities of both the terrorists and the target." Mroz (2009b) observes that, the line of demarcation between terrorism and violent extremism is anything but thick. Mroz postulates that, "violence in the absence of reason, or rather, the belief that committing an act of violence will produce benefits that outweigh the cost of human life. Violent extremism is homicide, genocide, fratricide, and, yes, it can also be terrorism." Mroz (2009b)

further indicates that the difference also rests on the modus operandi of the duo's violent activities. According to Mroz, while it is hard to counter violent extremism, countering terrorism is relatively easy.

In comparing extreme-right violence to Islamist extremists, Bjørgo and Ravndal (2019: 8-9) make the difference based on the frequency and the outcome of the attacks. Bjørgo and Ravndal argue that, "right-wing violence and terrorism differ significantly from attacks by Islamist extremists in terms of frequency and intensity. Between the 9/11 attacks and 2016, Islamist extremists killed 119 people in 31 deadly attacks in the US, while right-wing extremists killed 158 people in 89 deadly attacks. 17 During the same period (2001-2016) in Western Europe, Islamist extremists killed 539 people in 17 deadly attacks, while right-wing extremists killed 179 people in 85 deadly attacks. 18 Out of these 179 people, 77 were killed in the 22 July attacks." The high fatalities associated with violent Islamist extremism make it a more severe security threat than extreme right terrorist activities. The situation is much more complicated than meets the eye. In other words, one size does not fit all. In some countries, such as Germany, Norway, Sweden, and the US, attacks emanating from extreme rights have killed more people than violent Islamist extremists (Schuurman, 2019). It is worth noting that conceptually, violent extremism or violent Islamist Jihadism and terrorism are often used interchangeably in the literature (Basit, 2021; Schmid, 2017; Schmid, 2014). In the final analysis, the distinction between terrorism and violent extremism remains a contested issue.

In today's technology-driven and globalized world, borders do not confine the twin concepts of terrorism and violent extremism. While the motives behind the formation of groups such as al-Shabab, Boko Haram, ISIS, and the Taliban are influenced by geopolitics and are operationally interrelated, the reasons for the emergence of these extremist groups and why individuals are motivated to join their campaigns are unique, complex and distinct. Recent extremist attacks in Afghanistan, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, and the US, among others, "demonstrate the global reach of violent extremists" (Sheikh and Svensson, 2022). Many conflict and terrorism analysts give diverse reasons that will trigger the use of violence to address one's concerns (see Ardila, 2002; Furnish, 2005; Hudson, 1999; Lawal, 2002; McCauley, 2002; Reid, 2002; Thackrah, 2004). Among the root causes are grievances tied to political exclusion, social marginalization, repression by the state, abuse by security services, and lack of access to justice or resources (USAID, 2009). Others attribute violent extremism to the desire of the extremists to inflict as much pain as possible, cause disaffection between the public and the state authorities, seek vengeance, cause fear and panic, and create psychological unrest (Ambrozik, 2019; Wilhelmsen and Youngman, 2020).

3. Current Trends and Drivers of Violent Extremism in West Africa

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, there have been several distinct phases in violent extremism and terrorist activities in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, with a concurrent surge in Nigeria. Since then, violent extremism continues to spread in West Africa with a seemingly unbeatable resilience despite years of efforts by the regional states and some international actors to counter extremism in the sub-region. Across the West African sub-region, the evolving violent extremism can be deconstructed by way of several internal and external trends. The literature on

conflict studies and management has attributed the current violent attacks in the sub-region to a combination of old and new conditions, which make the region a fertile ground for terrorism to thrive. Such driving conditions include the inability of regional leaders to develop their national economies and the issue of porous borders across the sub-region, which allows violent actors to move freely from one state to the other with ease (Frimpong, 2020). Others also associate the escalating extremist attacks with the perennial conflict between farmers and herdsmen, which is often necessitated by the disastrous consequences of climate change; and the fallout of the global war on terror, among others. These non-exhaustive conditions and other country-specific social forces converged to fuel violent extremism in most parts of the sub-region. The most volatile and affected areas include Central Mali in the west, Burkina Faso in the center, and the area stretching from the Lake Chad Basin in the East (Moderan, 2021). Most conflict analysts fear that the increasing presence of religious extremists in neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso presents a serious spillover threat for recruitment and radicalization in Niger, Cote d'Ivoire, Togo, Ghana, and Benin.

Central Mali is often associated with unending security challenges because the area has always been engrossed in inter-communal conflicts. The proliferation of violent non-state actors and "elements" of self-styled defense groups, including brigands and extremist 'jihadist' groups, make the area the epicenter for violent clashes. The absence of a consistent functional state, which is exacerbated by the seeming neglect of the country by regional and international actors, makes the country and its environs even more susceptible to local violent non-state actors (Mathieu, 2017). Examples of the radical Islamist groups actively operating in Mali include Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the "Katiba Macina", Al Mourabitoun, and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), among other notable groups (Mathieu, 2017). These violent extremists have become more integrated and established in the community, taking undue advantage of the devastating poverty in local communities and the weak governance structures, in particular, to destabilize the country. As a result, within a decade (2012-2022), many observers of the situation in Mali do not hesitate to declare the country a disastrously failed state.

The situation in Mali is particularly central to interpreting the increasing violent extremism in the West African sub-region. The rise of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the northernmost provinces of Mali following the Tuareg rebellion in 2012 accelerated the weakening governance structures and the near-collapse of the state, providing the window of opportunity for religious extremists to spread their tentacles across the region (Lecocq and Klute, 2013). The failure of the Malian ruling government to nip the rebellions in the bud had led to a series of coup d'états (Chauzal and van Damme, 2015). The country is currently under sanctions imposed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 2021 due to the inability of the country's military government to keep to the road map in transitioning Mali into a civilian rule following its second military coup within nine months.

A desperately poor landlocked country subjected to intermittent bombing raids and ambushes since 2015, Burkina Faso is another state where the trend of violent extremism is on the rise (Bisson et al., 2021). Between 2016 and 2018, Ouagadougou, the capital city, witnessed a series of attacks by groups affiliated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Some analysts posit that the violence in Burkina Faso is a spillover effect of the extremist activities in the Sahel (Faleg,

2020; Nsaibia, 2021). This is particularly the case for the provinces of Oudalan and Soum located in the Sahel region. The attacks spread along the 1,325 km border with Mali in the northern part of the country, covering some provinces in the west, such as Kossi, Kénédougou, and Yatenga (Le Roux, 2019). Armed violent extremists operating on the border between Mali and Niger have destabilized the governance structures and infiltrated the security agencies of Burkina Faso, subjecting the country to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. An estimated 2.2 million Burkinabes, including 1.2 million, were in dire need of emergency humanitarian assistance as of January 2020.

Figure 2: Detailed administrative map of Burkina Faso. Source: vidiani.com

The heterogeneous nature of the armed extremist groups in Burkina Faso makes it very challenging to analyze. From bandits, ethnic minorities, local warlords, and farmers to radical Islamist jihadists such as Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram, and Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), every ethnic group, it would seem, has one form of an extremist group or affiliated to another group (Engels et al., 2018). This cast a delicate web of shadows over the actual triggers of the extremist attacks in most parts of the country. While several conflict analysts would trace the root causes of the disturbances in Burkina Faso to the conflicts in the Sahel region and that of neighbouring Mali, some have argued that extreme poverty resulting from many years of economic mismanagement plays a significant role in sowing seeds of dissatisfaction and disenchantment in the country (see Barkindo, 2020; Venturi, 2019). It is worth noting that the government of Burkina Faso, like its counterparts in the Sahel Region, has never

been able to "wean" its officials from the neo-patrimonial practices that breed clientelism, corruption, and misappropriations of the country's meagre natural resources (Snyder et al., 2018).

Today, Burkina Faso's jihadist organizations are operating and terrorizing the citizens with little or no difficulty. What is even more serious about the operations of these extremists is their sudden change in target (Lapegna, 2021). Primarily, attacks had previously focused on foreign officials in the country and military personnel. Though this category is still affected, the majority of the victims are now innocent civilians. Despite the rise in anti-terrorism operations by the state with the support of the international community, violent extremism continues to leap up with surprising nimbleness. This is the result of a combination of internal and external factors. There are long-established structural challenges within Burkina Faso since its independence from France on 5 August 1960. Such structural challenges as ethnic and religious tensions, endemic corruption, and mismanagement of the economy resulting in chronic underdevelopment render the country vulnerable to violent extremism (Nsaibia, 2021). Indeed, the expression of violent extremism in Burkina Faso is in myriad ways throughout the country. However, some of the contributing factors span the Sahel region. Decades-old problems with poor infrastructure, socioeconomic marginalization, unemployment, and persistent famine because of years of drought have combined with the evolving community support for armed groups to increase the vulnerability of the central Sahel region to extremist campaigns. Systemic corruption across the region also alienates the citizens from states' institutions (Cooke et al., 2016). Available data across Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali indicates that among the most important determinants of support for the activities of violent extremist groups is the perception that state officials are not only corrupt but also use their ill-gotten money to abuse and subdue vulnerable citizens (see Raineri, 2018).

Meanwhile, the Islamic State West Africa (ISWAP) and Boko Haram continue to exploit these old and new vulnerabilities in the Lake Chad Basin, increasing anxiety and insecurity among the citizenry. The attacks of these violent extremists have spread to several countries with unimaginable destructions. Since 2017, persistent violent attacks in the area have produced catastrophic statistics. (Frimpong, 2020). For instance, nearly 7 million people are seriously in need of emergency food deliveries, with over half a million children in the acute phase of malnutrition, while 2.5 million are said to be internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Cooke et al., 2016). The violent operations of these groups have also hampered access to land ownership and agricultural activities, exacerbating the complex humanitarian crisis of the Lake Chad Basin. These extremist Jihadists are also involved in ambushing cities and villages, abductions and recruiting youngsters to be trained as suicide bombers, using improvised explosive devices, and looting farms in the area. This affects the annual harvest of the subsistence farmers, which forms the source of economic livelihood for most of the rural residents in West African affected communities.

The security implications of these violent extremist attacks have a direct linkage with the growing insurgencies in Burkina Faso and Mali. In other words, the extremist security crisis has exerted a destabilizing toll on Burkina Faso, as it has on Mali. For instance, on Monday, 24th January 2022, there was a major spectacle in Burkina Faso, as the military formally declared the overthrow of the government of Roch Kaboré. This comes months after the double-putsch in Mali,

where the military ousted the late President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in August 2020. The military junta promised the international community, particularly the regional bloc (ECOWAS) that they would return the country to civilian rule within months. However, in May 2021, a second coup d'état was staged to roll back the gains made in the transition processes and reassert the military control over the affairs of the state. The military government later set out plans for long transition period. This move by the junta forced the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to impose additional sanctions on Mali. As I struggle to finish this paragraph, news just coming in is that the regional bloc – ECOWAS – has suspended Burkina Faso due to the 24th January coup. Less than five months ago, Guinea found itself in a similar situation when the military announced on national television that they had removed President Alpha Condé from office. Unlike the Guinean coup and those in Sudan, the motivation for the coup in Burkina Faso is mimicking that of Mali's - both coups are against the insurgents that are gradually taking the shape of the "infamous" Arab Spring, which had collapsed some well-established dictators in North Africa. Following the epidemic of military takeovers in Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Sudan, and a failed one in Guinea-Bissau, some regional security analysts are questioning why Africa is experiencing the current wave of coups after democracy (it would seem) had become entrenched in the continent. I intend to address this question on a different platform.

The persistent Islamist Jihadist attacks in these countries fuel public disenchantment against the governments and heighten resentment within the military. The general sentiments among the soldiers are that they are made to defend the state against these highly motivated violent extremists without adequate preparation. The recent putsch in Burkina Faso and the 2020 and 2021 coups in Mali, and even the 2012 military takeover in Burkina Faso, are all outbursts "of exasperation from the lower and middle-ranking soldiers who risk their lives on the front line in what is a brutally uncompromising conflict" against extremist groups in those countries. Of course, the crisis in the Sahel region is nothing new. For over a decade, inter-communal tensions and Islamist Jihadists have heightened insecurity in the sub-region, which weakens the ability of the governments to carry out their basic administrative functions and provide essential public services. It is clear that the age-old strategy in curtailing the spread of violent extremism in the Sahel, where communal violent extremists and terrorist groups have a foothold, needs some rethinking. The goal of any strategy to reduce or prevent the incidence of violent extremism in the Sahel should be to map out a national policy framework, which would incorporate the empowerment and mobilization of youth groups and domestic-based civil society groups as the vanguards for the prevention of and responding to violent extremism in the region. The 2013's intervention of the West African and French troops in Mali freed some cities from the occupation of extremist Islamic jihadists . However, this did not stop the expansion of extremist groups in the country. Moreover, over the last three years, especially in Burkina Faso, the spiral of instability has been in the accelerating mode. In Burkina Faso, patterns of indiscriminate attacks on security outposts and civilians rapidly spread from the more remote border areas of the south to affect the increasingly close communities of Ouagadougou (see Melly, 2022). The safety of the highway that links the eastern side to the city of Fada-Ngourma and the border with Niger can no longer be guaranteed. Mines are hidden along the rural roads in the area, threatening daily

commuting to schools and markets. Armed groups in Solhan and Tadaryat villages in the Yagha province slaughtered at least 174 people last June (Mabera et al., 2020).

Figure 3: The G5 Sahel Countries – Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger

Another disturbing trend in violent extremist and terrorist activities in the West African sub-region is Boko Haram's violent extremist operations in Nigeria, which has a spillover effect on nearby Benin, Cameroon, and Ghana, among others. Boko Haram, a terrorist group in northeastern Nigeria, is officially known as Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (Adelaja et al., 2018). The group seeks to oppose western education and impose the Islamic form of governance, known as sharia' law, throughout Nigeria. The Jihadist group is also active in northern Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. The emergence of Boko Haram in 2009 represents an expression of Nigeria's experience of modern-styled violent extremists and terrorists' activities around the globe (see Sodipo, 2013). Boko Haram like the other violent extremist groups we have already discussed has exploited the grievances of the public over the corruption of state officials, widespread poverty, abuses by security forces, and the ethnoreligious divides in indigenous communities to champion their unsubstantiated version of the Islamic religion in Northern Nigeria, in particular, and in Nigeria as a whole. (Adelaja et al., 2018). Though Boko Haram has a nationwide appeal in Nigeria, the locus of an upsurge of their activities, including youth radicalization, has been in northern Nigeria. The reasons for this are not farfetched. The three prevailing theories used by analysts to explain violent extremism and/or terrorism lie in social identity theory, relative deprivation theory, and poverty theory (see Dim, 2017). Although all these theories can find expression in the general state of northern Nigeria, the poverty theory

explains away the devastating socio-economic conditions in the area that help create the conducive environment for the violent extremist activities of Boko Haram to flourish.

There is no doubt that Boko Haran is among the most savage and ferocious violent extremists that are behind the unending trends of violent attacks in the West African sub-region. Although they can spread their tentacles across the sub-region, northern Nigeria seems to be the epicenter of their nefarious schemes (Akinola, 2015). Currently, there are some concerns about everyday life in northern Nigeria. Many are hesitant to participate openly in discussions concerning Boko Haram, which has become synonymous with abductions, kidnappings, destructions, and violent extremism. Since 2009, the Jihadist group has masterminded successful abductions and carried out several well-coordinated attacks across northern Nigeria and beyond, resulting in incomputable fatalities and creating thousands of unofficial refugees in the sub-region (Mantzikos, 2014). Like many so-called Islamic Jihadists, the targeted victims of Boko Haram include security forces, those who profess religious beliefs other than Islam, and to some extent, Muslims who do not share their "archaic" forms of Islamic teaching.
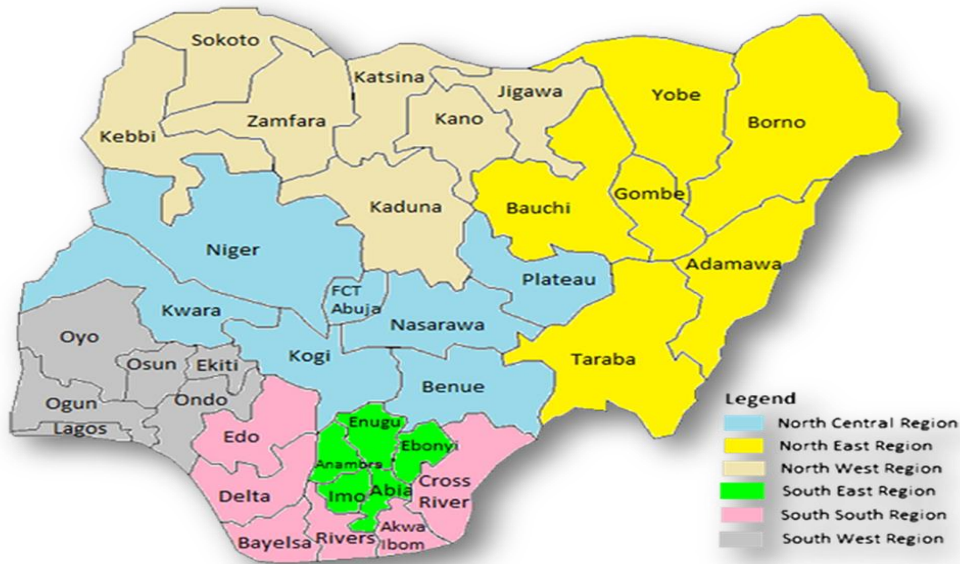
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Figure 4. Political Map of Nigeria

Among the many destructive attacks of Boko Haram is the abduction of the Chibok students on the night of April 14, 2014. On that fateful night, Boko Haram militants ransacked a government girls' secondary school in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria, and kidnapped 276 students who had gathered there to take exams (Pearson and Zenn, 2021). These were mostly young Christian girls aged from 16 to 18. The incident had sparked one of the most talked-about social media campaigns around the globe, with tweeters using the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. Shortly after they were kidnapped, some of the girls managed to escape, while the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) negotiated the release of about 100 more in exchange for the release of Boko Haram imprisoned militants. One of those who managed to escape helped us understand the main reason for the abductions. The escapee told the BBC Hausa service that Boko

Haram militants had inquired, "You're only coming to school for prostitution. Boko [Western education] is haram [forbidden] so what are you doing in school?" The 2014 Chibok kidnapped girls constitute a minute fraction of the numerous victims of Boko Haram. The exact figure for Boko Haram victims is hard to access, but according to Amnesty International, no less than 2,000 women and young girls might have fallen victims to the Jihadists' perennial abductions since 2014 (Amnesty International, April 14, 2015). The devastating consequences of the violent attacks of Boko Haram are captured in this quote by the Amnesty International Nigeria office:

> Since the start of 2014, Amnesty International documented at least 300 raids and attacks carried out by Boko Haram against civilians. During their attacks on towns, they would systematically target the military or police first, capturing arms and ammunition before turning on the civilian population. They would shoot anyone trying to escape, rounding up and executing men of fighting age. Almost all towns and villages in Borno state have a long list of missing persons, mostly women, girls, and young men.

The underlying dynamics and/or causes of the violent extremist attacks by Boko Haram are not in any way different from those I have already discussed concerning Burkina Faso and Mali. It is public knowledge that the emergence of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria has everything to do with the limited economic opportunities for youth development, the perceived corruption of government officials, and the general ubiquitous poverty level in the area. Although Nigeria is home to the second-largest proven oil reserves in Africa, 70% of the population in northern Nigeria lives below the poverty line. As of 2020, Nigeria was the leading oil producer in Africa, with a production level amounted to 86.9 million metric tons in the country. Yet, the unemployment rate in the northern part of Nigeria, mainly among Muslims, is higher than the national average (see table 1 for more details). These factors and many others help violent extremists to derive support from the citizens.

Table 1. Regional Divergences in Quality of Life

Region	Youth Literacy (%, Age 5-16)	Primary School Attendance (%)	Secondary School Attendance (%)	Access to improved Drinking Water (%)	Access to improved Sanitation (%)	Small & Medium Business per 100,000	Watches Television Once a Week (%)	Reads a Newspaper Once a Week (%)
North East	18	43	24	39	28	9	19	9
North West	24	37	21	47	37	13	21	10
North Central	43	67	41	51	27	18	49	19
South West	78	79	64	73	26	20	73	21
South South	70	80	59	63	32	14	75	30
South East	66	79	85	71	41	15	52	27

Sources: Nigeria National Bureau of Statistics, Nigeria National Population Commission, and the U.S. Agency for International Development. Survey figures for "Drinking Resources" and "Sanitation" are from 2012, all others are from 2010.

The situation in northern Nigeria provides a perfect fertile ground for both violent extremism and radicalization to flourish. While violent extremism can be seen as "the beliefs and actions of people who support or are willing to use ideologically motivated violence to achieve radical ideological, religious or political goals," radicalization refers to the process through which an individual or group of individuals join violent extremist groups (Living Safe Together, n.d.:1). Changes in one's self-identification, or factors leading to the same, are often the starting point of individual radicalization. Those changes are mostly fueled by unaddressed grievances regarding domestic or international issues. Domestically, what is happening in northern Nigeria is traceable to the time of independence of the country. Immediately after Nigeria's independence in 1960, the struggle for ethnoreligious identities and mutual distrust in the north and south hampered the development of a true pan-Nigeria identity. Politics in Nigeria in those intervening years was characterized by fierce competition for economic resources, which is still one of the driving factors for violent clashes in the country. "This competition…encourages recourse to sectional identities, so much so that loyalty to ethnic communities takes precedence over national loyalty" (Joseph, 1988: 43). Unfortunately, some state officials are considered subtle facilitators of these unhealthy competitions. This degenerates into a fierce struggle for political power, which in turn fuels ethnoreligious sentimentalism within increasingly religious intolerant communities.

Ghana has been a model of democracy in the West African sub-region since the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1993. Despite several intense political tensions over the outcomes of some elections, the country has witnessed three enviable peaceful presidential transitions from one political party to another (Osei, 2018). Ghana's current and previous governments have always exhibited political objectives or perspectives, which focus on the country's industrialization agenda, making the private sector the engine of economic growth, agricultural sector development, and job creation being the key pillars. Indeed, a nation's stable security and democratic environment provide a conducive platform for institutional development and economic growth. A vibrant civil society and a strong democratic political heritage are the best assets Ghana has to help tackle all political-related challenges. In other words, in the imaginary world of a perfect political environment, Ghana has it all to be regarded as a model democracy for the West African sub-region.

Despite these achievements, the security of Ghana has deteriorated significantly lately, with an unprecedented increase in organized crimes such as armed robbery, abductions, "contract killings", and a series of kidnappings in major cities like Accra, Cape Coast, Kumasi, Takoradi, and Tamale. For instance, on September 12, 2020, a University of Ghana law lecturer, Professor Emmanuel Benneh, was murdered in his house. The murder of Ahmed Hussien Suale, a 33-year-old investigative journalist, on January 16, 2019, is still a subject matter for intense debate in the country. Lastly, on February 9, 2016, a Member of Parliament (MP) for Abuakwa North, Mr. J.B. Danquah-Adu, was stabbed dead in the early hours of the day. Similarly, two Canadian girls were kidnapped in Kumasi in June 2019. Before the Kumasi incident, four young girls were kidnapped in Takoradi in 2018. After a year of investigation, the four Takoradi girls were confirmed dead by the police. However, the police were able to rescue the Canadian girls after a few weeks of intense pressure on the authorities. There are still some lingering questions regarding the death of the Takoradi girls. These examples are not isolated cases; there are many reports of attacks and

killings of police officers, chiefs, entertainers, and election-related killings, especially in the 2020 general elections, where six people lost their lives.

Concerning violent extremism in Ghana, the magnitude, the actors, and the modus operandi cannot in any way – substance or form – compared to that of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Nigeria; for there is no Islamist Jihadist or terrorist attack in Ghana as of yet. However, most of the underlying causes of violent extremism (in all forms) are ripened in Ghana: youth unemployment, abject poverty in most parts of the country, marginalization and politicization of state institutions, corruption, social (and political) inequalities, the threat of terrorism and youth radicalization, as well as porous borders, are the prevailing circumstances that lead to violent extremism. None of these causes of violent extremism is in short supply in Ghana. Accordingly, the tendencies for violent extremism manifest in political vigilantism, chieftaincy and chieftaincy-related conflicts, inter-, and intra-religious tensions, and farmer-Fulani herder clashes, among others (see European Union Report, 2020). All these issues provide a powerful stimulus for extremist groups that seek to garner support among the local population to be able to recruit and radicalize aggrieved parties.

In Northern Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali, terrorist activities and violent extremism are still on the rise, especially in Nigeria, where recent attacks have targeted churches in northwestern Nigeria. In neighboring Burkina Faso, the deteriorating security situation has fueled attempted extremist attacks on a Catholic Church in the Upper West Region's town of Hamile. There are also intermittent communal conflicts between Mossi and Fulani ethnic groups in the region. There is, therefore, a real threat of possible infiltration of extremist groups into the country.

4. Combating Violent Extremism in West Africa

In recent years, the increasing trends of terrorist activities and violent extremism in West Africa have been complex and negatively impactful. The security implications of the menace are unquantifiable. Violent extremism also takes a heavy toll on the development of democratic institutions and economic growth of affected countries, which affects the livelihoods of vulnerable groups like the elderly, women, and children. In the Lake Chad Basin, the devastating impact of Boko Haram cannot escape even the most "uninitiated" security analyst. The intractable ethnic and religious conflicts in northern Mali facilitate the operations and recruitment tactics of violent extremist groups, allowing them to carry out attacks across borders in the region with impunity. Indeed, conflicts and violent extremism in Mali have become a chicken and egg dilemma; it is difficult to figure out which instigates the other. The unending political instability in Libya is breeding and exporting new strains of ethnic tensions, violent extremism, and Islamic Jihadism to West Africa. On the back of persistent economic, social and religious vulnerabilities, the insecurity emanating from extremist activities has led to a surge in smuggling, human trafficking, and migration. Trade routes in areas that once carried myrrh and salt across the region are increasingly becoming the facilitating itineraries for the illicit trade of weapons, drugs, and people (Sollazzo and Nowak, 2020).

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the sub-regional body, has formulated different strategies to nip this menace in the bud. While these strategies, without a doubt, have helped reduce the effects of the violent attacks, the trends of violent extremism and

terrorist insurgency are still rising in some Western African countries (Subedi and Jenkins, 2016). There is no one-size-fit-all solution for a problem of this magnitude. Mapping out strategic security measures to counter the menace is important but not enough. Security solutions do not often focus on addressing many of the taproots that breed violent extremism. Indeed, the aftermath of 9/11 and the subsequent US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq revitalize the feasibility of the argument that terrorism and extremism could not be countered and successfully defeated solely by a military response. A practical case in point is the Nigerian government's handling of the Boko Haram menace in the country. When the insurgency group started in 2009, successive Nigerian governments resorted to brutal force to curb the Boko Haram menace. On 21 April 2013, for instance, the Nigerian military killed over 200-suspected members of the Boko Haram in a single operation (Pearson and Zenn, 2021). With countless killings, arrests, and jailing of suspected members, supporters or financiers of the militant group, the devastating attacks of the group on innocent civilians continue to escalate in northern Nigeria and beyond.

The military response to militant or extremist groups will often result in more terrorism and fatal violent reprisals against the civilian population. To this end, several countries began expanding and retooling their toolkits for counterterrorism by including what is known in the literature as "soft approaches" to counterterrorism. Others refer to this approach as CVE or countering violent extremism programming (Wolfe et al., 2019). USAID piloted this model in Chad and Niger in 2006, which proved tremendously successful. The operational principles of the CVE program include fostering "long-term solutions by building West African government and civil society capacity to counter" violent extremism in the sub-region; promoting "knowledge sharing and synergy by working closely with a broad spectrum of CVE actors" in the field; and ensuring "that interventions do not have harmful unintended consequences" (USAID, 2021: 2). Therefore, instead of resorting to military responses to the brutalities of the violent extremists, leaders of the West African sub-region may need to revisit the CVE model. There is little research to support the military approach to combating violent extremism. Indeed a report compiled by RAND researchers on terrorist groups from 1968 to 2006 "…indicate[s] that terrorist groups are defeated by military force less than 10 percent of the time, but that nearly 85 percent of groups end because of operations carried out by local police or intelligence agencies or because they negotiated a settlement with their governments." (RAND Annual Report, 2008: 9). Even if the sub-regional body (ECOWAS) has the necessary military prowess (I doubt it does) to defeat violent extremism, there is an urgent need to shift strategies to align with what evidence tells us will work in the fight against extremism. Such strategies must be rigorous and measured. To this end, I offer a few priority areas to consider:

1. Understanding the local context will be a facilitating factor for any strategy to achieve the needed results. While the menace of violent extremist attacks has become an interrelated global trend, the reasons are varied. The motivating factors that will propel a British to join ISIS are markedly different from that of a young female suicide bomber who risks her life to support the illogical ideology of Boko Haram in Nigeria. Understanding these unique contexts would be key to mapping out sustainable strategies and responses to counter radicalization and violent extremism.

2. Security responses and law enforcement efforts must be just and responsible. Violent extremist groups and terrorists seek to provoke state overreaction, hoping that repressive reactions will strengthen the legitimacy of their violent attacks. Thus, the need to deliver measured law enforcement and proportionate security responses to violent attacks or threats of violent extremism are crucial. A 2014 Global Terrorism Index by the Institute for Economics and Peace affirms that, "countries, where terror attacks are concentrated, are highly correlated with those where the state commits gross human rights abuses, such as extrajudicial killings." Extrajudicial penalties or killings and heavy-handed tactics "often serve to fuel the grievances that motivate the violence and advance the agenda of extremists" (IEP, 2014).

3. Efforts to combat terrorism and violent extremism in the sub-region must move beyond guns and armour vehicles to focus on enabling civil society organizations and empowering local communities. I cannot emphasize this last point enough. Lasting solutions to radicalization and violent extremism are not achievable by military interventions and oppressive state policies alone. Community leaders, influential family heads, and civil society organizations need to be empowered to identify those at risk of radicalization before things get out of hand. A report by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) posits that, "the grievances that fuel radicalization often are exacerbated by an absence of social, peer and family support, as well as a lack of skills or ability to identify and develop non-violent, practical solutions to these problems" (USIP, 2016).

Conclusion

This paper has been explaining the increasing trends of violent extremism in West Africa. The discussion outlined the drivers behind the rising influence of extremist groups in the sub-region. The paper also highlighted the response of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to curb the increasing threat of violent extremism in the sub-region. The situation is more volatile in some countries than in others. Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria are the most affected states by the activities of extremists and terrorist groups. Among the fatal violent extremist groups in the Sahel region in particular, and the West African sub-region as a whole, are Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, and the Islamic State West Africa. Boko Haram, an affiliate of ISIS, is a jihadist terrorist organization based in Nigeria. The group also carries out intermittent violent attacks in Cameroon. Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, the al-Qaeda affiliate, has conducted several fatal attacks in Mali.

The literature on security studies and management has attributed the current violent extremism in the sub-region to a combination of old and new conditions, which make the sub-region a fertile ground for terrorism to thrive. Such driving conditions include the inability of regional leaders to develop their national economies and the issue of porous borders across the sub-region, which allows violent non-state actors to move freely from one state to the other with ease. Others also associate the escalating extremist attacks with the perennial conflicts between farmers and Fulani herdsmen, which are often necessitated by the disastrous consequences of climate change; and the fallout of the global war on terror, among others. When an intractable conflict persists, it serves as a breeding ground for dispersed violent non-state actors and extremist groups to fester. This also presents a conducive atmosphere for them to infiltrate the political elites and establish dangerous political alliances, making it difficult to defeat them. Countering

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and preventing violent extremism come with multifaceted approaches. However, the one often resorted to is the use of brutal force. The predominant reliance on military force to counter violent extremism often end up providing the extremists with the much-needed justification and legitimacy for more violence.

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