The transformation of Africa into a 'glocal terrorist hub': 3D jihad between narco-terror, maritime piracy, and sexual slavery[1]

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Abstract:

Transnational terrorism with a jihadist focus has always been fed by both internal and external factors. This is why the African branches of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are able to adapt to local conditions, which has effects that go far beyond national borders. In so doing, Africa has become a 'glocal terrorist hub', undergoing a process of trans-nationalisation between the local and the global, with implications for regional security. The study frames itself against this backdrop, employing a dual 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' analysis to examine the operational strategies of terrorist groups and their doctrinal underpinnings. These strategies form a three-dimensional jihad, encompassing narco-terrorism, maritime piracy, sexual slavery, and gender-based violence as terror strategies. Therefore, counter-terrorism policies in Africa, already based on hard measures, need to focus increasingly on soft mechanisms to prevent and counter radicalisation and violent extremism, strengthened on the one hand by sustainable security architectures and on the other by integrated approaches to anti-terrorism cooperation at national, regional, and international levels.

Keywords:

Africa; 'global jihad hub'; maritime piracy; narco-terror; nikah jihad; sexual terrorism; counter-terrorism.

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Introduction

Groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Africa, particularly Boko Haram and al-Shabaab, make extensive use of conflicts, crises, state collapses, and international geopolitical upheavals to spread their constantly evolving globalised extremist ideology (International Crisis Group, ICG, 2016). Since then, Islamic terrorist networks in the African theatre have, on the one hand, instrumentalised the COVID-19 pandemic with opportunistic propagandist rhetoric, portraying it as a 'soldier of the Caliphate' and a divine punishment against the enemies of Allah (Lippiello, 2022). On the other hand, the jihadists consider the Russian war against Ukraine since 2022 to be a conflict between 'nations of unbelievers', giving them moral permission to join either side to serve the cause of jihad (Brzuszkiewicz, 2022). Similarly, the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023 had a domino effect, causing tremors across the Horn of Africa and boosting the Al-Shabaab Islamists in Somalia (de Waal, 2023). This is evident in the increasing piracy in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden, leading to a crisis in the Red Sea. Iranian-supported Houthi rebels from Yemen have launched multiple attacks on Israeli-linked ships (AFP & Le marin, 2024).

According to the Global Terrorism Index 2024 (GTI), the core of terrorism is in Africa, specifically the central Sahel region of Sub-Saharan Africa, where violent conflict remains the primary engine of terrorism, accounting for 90% of assaults and 98% of casualties in 2023 (Institute for Economics & Peace, IEP, 2024). The study on Africa's transformation into a glocal terrorist hotspot should be viewed through this lens, with an overview of jihadism segmented into three overlapping dimensions: narco-terrorism, maritime piracy, and sexual slavery.

The analysis, which is inherently interdisciplinary, is reinforced by research in security studies, religious thinking, political science, and international relations. Open source research tools are designed for raw data collection and analysis as part of the study of the African jihadist phenomena. Open Source Information (OSIF) gathers data primarily from widely distributed generic sources, including newspapers, books, magazines, general daily reports, and online Internet searches for statistics, data, articles, studies, and reports (Munteanu, 2019).

The following questions guide this study as it tackles the issues mentioned above: How has multidimensional Jihadism, including narco-terror, maritime piracy, and sexual slavery, transformed Africa into a 'Glocal Terrorist Hub' that threatens regional security? The following sub-questions complement this core question.

- *How has the interaction between endogenous and exogenous factors led to the spread of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State affiliates in Africa as the main actors of transnational jihadist terror?*

- *How is the hybridisation process of African jihadist threats articulated around a triptych of 'narco-jihadism', 'sea jihad', and 'nikah jihad'*[3] *('sexual jihad)?*
- *What are the primary African sustainable counter-terrorism strategies that aim to address global issues such as counter-piracy and 'conflict-related sexual violence' (CRSV)?*

Given the current international situation of the post-October 7, 2023, Hamas-Israel war, the analytical thread will be primarily directed by the following overarching assumptions. Firstly, the transformation of Africa into a hub of global terrorism does not appear to be the unequivocal result of religion, with its ideological and theological underpinnings, but rather of a combination of endogenous and exogenous factors as the main incubators of African franchises affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Secondly, the African jihadist governance model is distinguished by a two-pronged process of hybridisation and transnationalisation buried in a triptych of 'narco-terrorism', 'naval piracy', and 'nikah jihad', which reflect the division activities of jihadist actors. This has resulted in integrated cooperation in terms of sustainable counter-terrorism and preventing violent extremism at regional and international levels.

The study of Africa's transformation into a 'Glocal Terrorist Hub' is orientated toward a 'mixed analytical approach' methodology. On the one hand, it relies on a constructive hermetic hybrid model of homogeneity versus heterogeneity, and on the other, it consolidates within a 'bottom-up' structure that begins at the 'local' level and progresses to the 'global' level of the phenomenon; this 'top-down' approach (Guidère, 2008) thus explains the internal and external variables of the spread of African jihadist hotspots.

The article proceeds in three parts. The first part focuses on how Africa has evolved into a 'Glocal Terrorist Hub' through al-Qaeda and Islamic State branches, examining multifaceted ideological and theological underpinnings as well as both exogenous and endogenous factors. Then, it scrutinises the hybridisation of African jihadist threats, which are framed through 'narco-terrorism' networks, the 'sea jihad', a nexus between 'terror, piracy, and criminality' as the main activity of Al-Shabaab, and 'nikah jihad', which has evolved into a warfare strategy of Boko Haram. Finally, African sustainable counter-terrorism addresses solutions based on soft governance to counter and prevent violent extremism and deradicalisation through innovative approaches to jihadist groups, organised crime, regional counter-piracy, and sexual terrorism.

[3] In March 2013, the Saudi preacher Muhammad bin Abdul-Rahman Al-Arifi's Twitter account featured the term 'jihad al-nikah'. Al-Arifi is the *Imam* of the mosque at the Saudi Navy's King Fahad Naval Academy.

Africa's transformation into 'glocal terrorist hub': A multidimensional factors and actors

The current landscape of Islamist extremism in Africa illustrates the multifaceted nature of jihadist terror, particularly the spread of local and transnational asymmetric networks within Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State as major disruptors of regional and international security. Thus, ideological and theological underpinnings, along with an array of multidimensional endogenous and exogenous factors, serve as the main incubators of Jihadist warmongering, transforming the African continent into an epicentre for violent extremism and radicalisation (see Diagram 1 drawn up by the author).

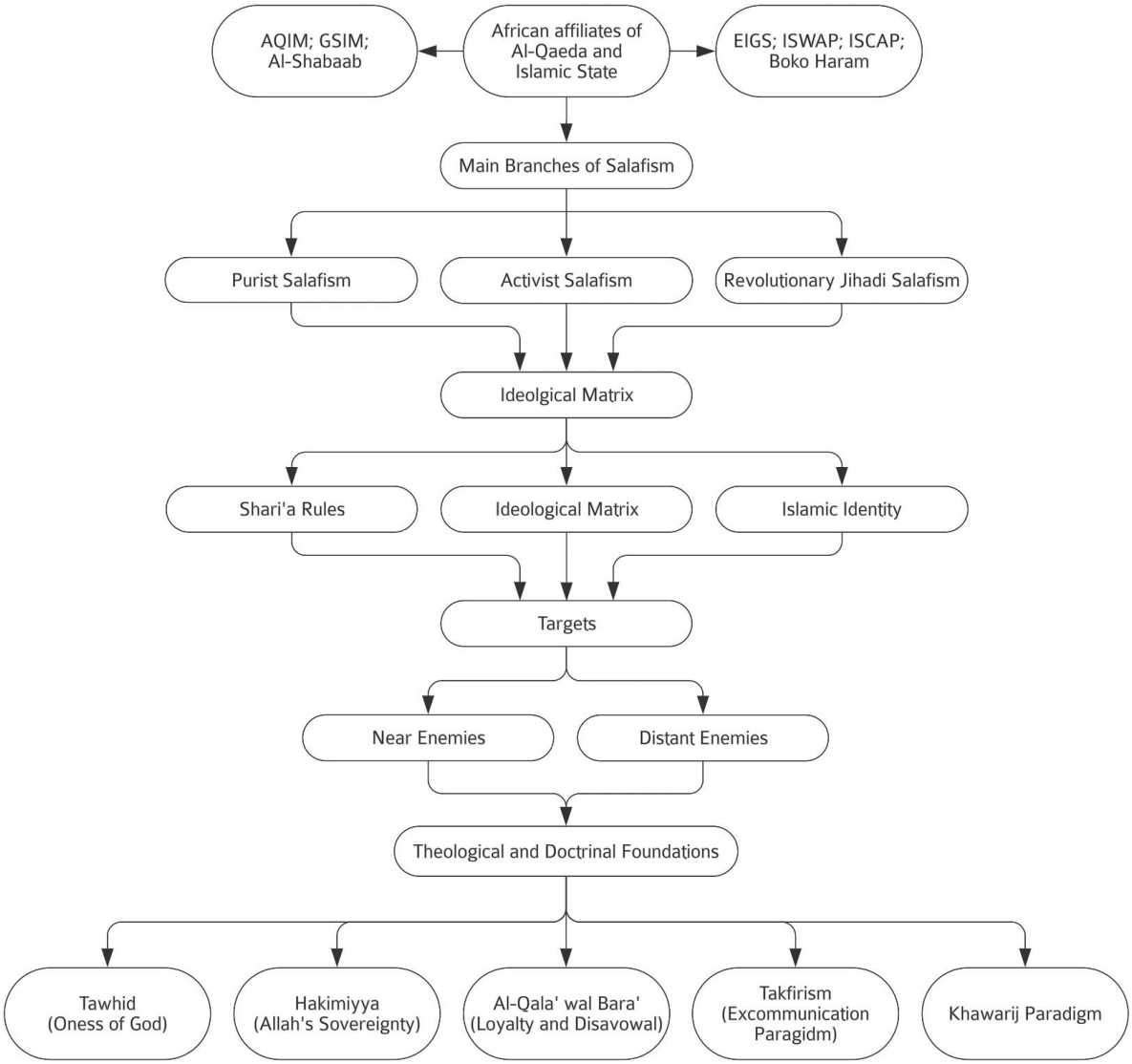

Figure 1: African Jihadist Salafism: Ideologies and features. Source: Author.

Transnational jihadist terror: Ideological matrix and theological foundations

The theological and ideological aspects of contemporary Islamic movements emerged in the social and political contexts of Islamic history through the religious thought of the Kharijis, Ibadis, Hanbalis, and Wahhabis (Khatab, 2011), with a view to establishing an Islamic order within the framework of the Shari'a, an inevitable step that would pave the way for the creation of a new golden age of the 'Islamic caliphate' (Turner, 2014). Indeed, jihadists advocate a narrow interpretation of Islam, limiting it to physical and material jihad and widely using it to justify struggle, violence, extremism, and terrorism, thereby establishing the sixth pillar of Islam (Esposito, 2004).

However, the Salafi-jihadist movement, comprising purists, activists, and revolutionary jihadists, shares a common set of religious beliefs. Four main ideas form the basis of these beliefs: 'tawed' and 'hakimiyya', which clarify Allah's legitimate authority; 'al-wala' wa-l-bara', demonstrating Muslims' loyalty to their fellow believers and their rejection of 'unbelievers'; and 'takfirism', symbolising the expulsion of Muslims from Islam for apostasy (Ranstorp, 2019). Consequently, the doctrine of 'martyrdom' subsumes the global precepts and beliefs of the post-modern Salafist jihad, namely Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and its regional affiliates, under a common religious ideology.

Meanwhile, the offensive jihad that supports today's global terrorist groups, like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (Shah, 2013), is a result of how Muslims have historically organised their political and military interactions with other countries based on their view of the world as having two parts: the center and the edges. This is why the Islamic classification of a place as 'home of war' (dar al-harb) or 'home of Islam' (dar al-Islam) (Abbès, 2003) is a result of this view. Thus, the trajectory of the global jihad clearly divides into distinct spheres: the 'internal jihad' and the 'external jihad' (Gunaratna, 2010), where the 'holy war' against 'infidels' specifically aims to expand the territory of Islam as a collective religious duty (Rabil, 2018). This is why Al-Qaeda and the Islamic state popularised the 'Near and Far Enemy' debate as a 'pragmatic jihadism strategy' in the early 1990s. However, the near enemy refers to local regimes in the Middle East and the Arab world, while western countries, specifically the United States (US) and the European Union (EU), represent the far enemy (Vidino, 2021). By demonising the other as the absolute enemy, the jihadist conception centralises the purifying jihad against other religions, particularly Jews and Christians, viewed as composite crusaders and satanic (Taguieff, 2017).

Accordingly, Islamist jihadist groups use a 'geopolitical triptych' model to destabilise enemy states, adopting a 'flying jump' strategy that focuses on creating a sanctuary, securing a 'grey zone', and choosing an area of action (Gaüzere, 2012). In fact, these are the same mechanisms used by African jihadist movements. The regional branches of Al-Qaeda and ISIS on the African continent have used the Gaza war between Israel and Hamas since October 2023 to urge supporters to carry out attacks on Israeli and

American interests, thus taking advantage of anti-Western sentiment to mobilise support for a globalised jihad with the risk of escalating into a regional conflict (Wilson Center, 2024).

However, jihadists are exploiting the galvanising cause of the 'far enemy' by positioning themselves locally, regionally, and transnationally as countering the 'crusader-Zionist' enemy, namely the US-Israel alliance. The Gaza war has also reinforced the old narrative of 'near enemy', condemning the so-called apostate Arab and Middle Eastern regimes that are complicit with western allies (Bacon, 2023).

The African jihadist threat dilemma: between rooted causes and multi-dimensional factors

The spread of transnational terrorism as a pathological condition reflects multiple independent variables, including a complex process of multidimensional internal and external factors. Hence, the root causes of terrorism constitute a specific form of connection between the social, economic, political, and demographic conditions underlying the acts of radicalisation and violent extremism (Assemblée Parlementaire de La Méditerranée, 2010). However, endogenous factors are the breeding ground of African terrorism; these include the spread of poverty, unemployment, famine, the tragic situation of children, the spread of serious diseases, as well as disparities in development caused by setbacks (Tiendrébéogo, 2020).

The COVID-19 epidemic significantly exacerbated poverty in Africa, which accounts for 54.8% of global poverty, according to the 2024 Africa Sustainable Development Report (ASDR) (African Development Bank, ADB, 2024). As a result, failing and fragile states have become breeding grounds for terrorism, especially in the Sahel-Saharan region where the absence of a state and the inability of security structures to effectively control vast geographical areas have led to a surge in jihadist activism (Piazza, 2008). Moreover, terrorism has propelled the peripheries of West Africa and the Sahel into the heart of a blurred geographical zone where the interactions between spatiality and networks overlap (Walther, 2010).

External influences, particularly in states with a colonial past, have led to African religious radicalisation, rejecting external models stemming from colonial domination (Pellerin, 2017). Sufism, a non-violent, non-political branch of Islam, has played a role in political and military resistance movements (Muedini, 2015). In so doing, post-independence Islamist movements have emerged as a defensive mechanism of the Muslim world against the neo-patrimonial governance and new colonialism of the Western powers (Raineri, 2017). Meanwhile, Salafi Wahhabism networks of Saudi-funded private schools, which primarily teach religious content through various NGOs and mosques in Mali and Mauritania, have contributed to the rise of terrorism (Steinberg, 2015). Indeed, strong Qatari Islamism has an interventionist agenda in the

North African and Sahel scenes due to the exceptional circumstances of the post-Arab spring in Libya and the destabilising effects of the Malian crises (Moniquet, 2013; Besenyő & Romaniuk, 2024).

Additionally, France's military and political actions in Libya in 2011 and Mali in 2013 to fix the problems of failing states in the region were characterised by a militaristic view of local problems that were systematically put in a global context and blamed on the radicalisation of Islam. However, interventionism is actually a cause of terrorism because it feeds the transnational nature of the threat of 'jihadism without borders', which is mainly represented by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (Pérouse de Montclos, 2019).

'Glocal' affiliates of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Africa: New actors of insecurity

Specific geographical and geopolitical areas and contexts link African terrorism, making jihadists identifiable territorial actors with distinct spatial trajectories, in a clear intersect between geographical location, identity, and political effects (Morgado, 2023). On the one hand, geographical proximity within jihadists' networks explains the expansion of transnational jihadism (Bahgat, 2013). On the other hand, the jihadist geopolitical perception consists of classifying and ordering the territories, with an operational process of legitimisation, preparation, and action, into three realms: 'hostile zones', where attacks are to be carried out, and 'safe zones', where plans for the attacks can be made. In addition, there are 'shatter belt' regions that are legitimate priorities for conquest (Hobbs, 2005).

Whereas, the cyclical nature of African terrorism has evolved from the fourth to the fifth wave as the constitutive element of globalisation (Czornik, 2022), within a 'glocal' strategy that illustrates the new characteristics of today's jihadist militancy, wherein local and regional Al-Qaeda and Islamic state affiliates predominantly proliferate (O'Farrell, 2024). Consequently, the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) in Africa's Sahel-Sahara region has escalated due to their relocation following the collapse of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) Caliphate. Nevertheless, the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT). estimated that there were more than 5,000 FTFs in the Sahel in 2022, representing a major challenge for national and regional security (ACSRT, 2022).

However, the spread of African jihadism reflects the levels of articulation between local, regional, and then global inspirations (Guidère, 2008). In 2006, the North African jihadist insurgency integrated its agenda with that of Al-Qaeda, adopting a continuous internationalisation strategy under the name 'Al-Qaeda Organisation in the Country of the Islamic Maghreb', or 'AQIM' (SPINOZA, 2011). Indeed, the local franchises of AQ and IS in Africa combine modes of global jihadist governance with localised realities under a process of 'transnationalisation'. This, in turn, is characterised by a fractured

system of alliances and rivalries, notably over the interpretation of Islam and the legitimate means of radical political and religious change, as well as the sharing of natural resources (Cold-Ravnkilde, 2022). Accordingly, the Sahel region of West Africa became the new hotspot for the escalation of jihadist conflicts, specifically the local branch of the Islamic State in the Great Sahara (ISGS) and the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM), an alliance of groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda (Nsaibia & Weiss, 2020; see Besenyő & Romaniuk, 2024; Romaniuk et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, Islamic State militant groups have experienced numerous transformations, including splits, alliances, and a shift in allegiance to the global ISIS. This shows that Islamist militant groups are consolidating their presence (Suleiman, 2022) in North Africa among new 'wilayats' or 'provinces' of the Islamic State in Algeria, Libya, Algeria, and Sinai (Zelin, 2024). Furthermore, geographically asymmetrical networks of Islamic states pose a diffuse challenge (European External Action Service, EEAS, 2023), significantly impacting the security and political landscape, particularly with the emergence of new affiliates in Sub-Saharan Africa, which includes numerous provinces in the Great Sahara, Sahel, West Africa, and Central Africa (Warner et al., 2022).

The hybridisation of African jihadist threats: A triptych between 'narco-terrorism', 'naval piracy', and 'nikah jihad'

Africa's jihadist nebulas shape an arc of multi-dimensional features under a new form of international subdivision of terrorist activities, essentially based on a dual model of hybridisation and transnationalisation driven by the local franchises of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Thus, post-modern pragmatic terrorism forms a terror-crime nexus spectrum, characterised by a cross-triptych between 'narco-terrorism', 'naval piracy', and 'nikah jihad' (see Diagram 2 drawn up by the author).

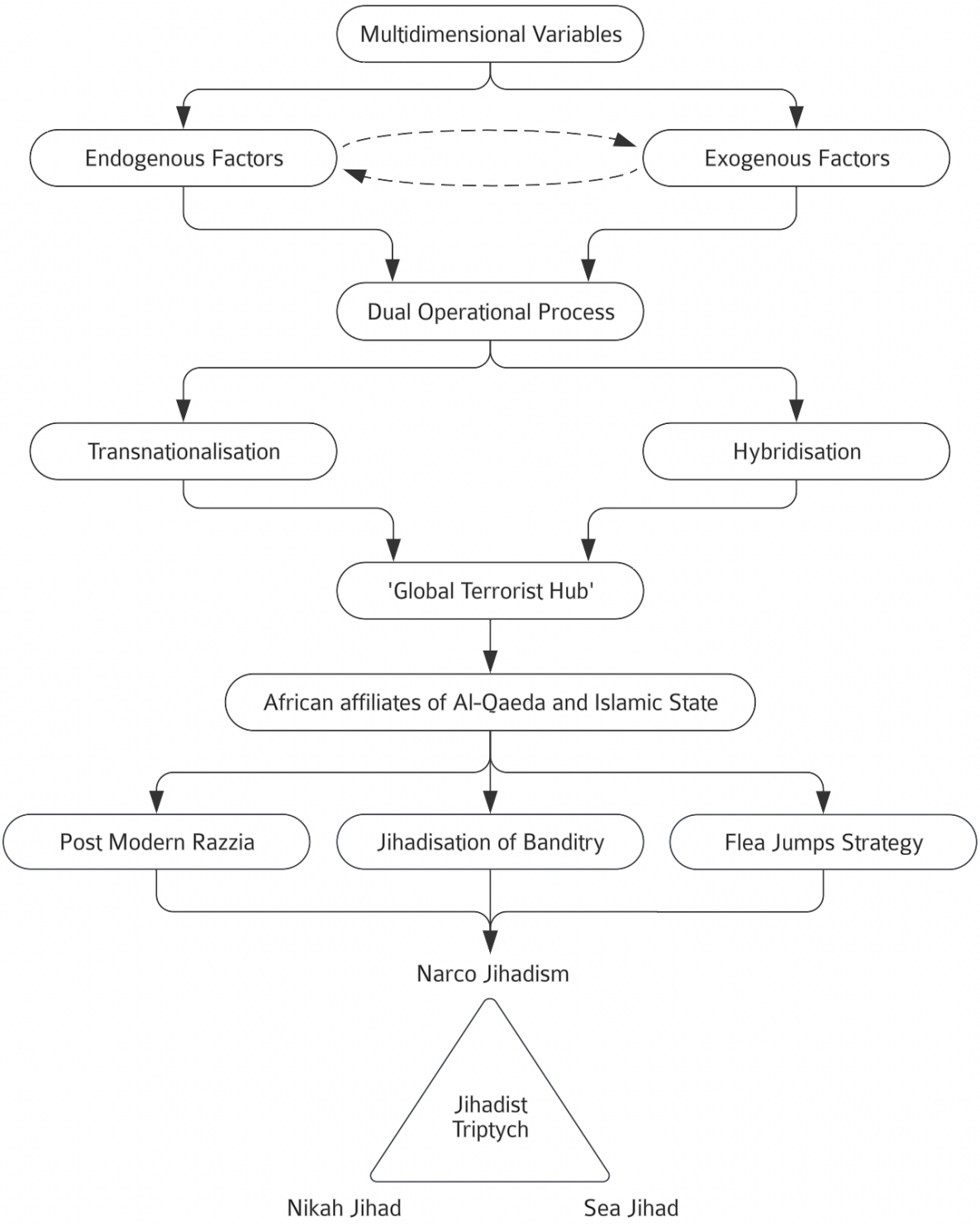

Figure 2: African jihadist threats triptych. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State African affiliates: A hybrid model between 'Narco-jihadism' and post-modern 'Razzia' Source: Author.

Globalisation is facilitating stronger linkages between global criminal networks and local criminal groups through transnational organised crime (TOC), thus fueling armed groups' expansion in Africa (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, n.d.). According to the

Organized Crime Index for Africa 2023, transnational crime increased steadily from 0.08 points to 5.25 points between 2019 and 2023, mainly attributable to the post-pandemic period of COVID-19. Non-state actors, specifically jihadist groups, continued to participate in transnational crime activities, with a peak in East, West, and Southern Africa. Compared to other drug markets, the cocaine trade on the continent has seen the largest increase since 2019 (+1.12) (ENACT, 2023).

Narco-Jihadists are active in the African continent, with hierarchical cells that are autonomous but subject to a pyramidal model, a marked use of violence, and a strong political base. Indeed, jihadism has had a definite influence on the expansion of drug trafficking, from which it draws much of its funding. On the one hand, Islamist groups often establish a close relationship with drug traffickers, providing them with military support in the form of armed escorts for drug convoys. This is evident through the adoption by jihadists operating in Libya and by Boko Haram of tramadol as a drug for combatants (Oumarou, n.d.).

Simultaneously, Captagon has become the new 'drug of Jihad', used by African terror organisations and supported by 'narco-states' (Lahav, 2023). Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) profits from the connections between terrorism and drug trafficking, particularly the transportation of cocaine from West and North Africa to Latin America and Europe (Minteh, 2013). Since then, the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM) has also been involved in drug trafficking, smuggling, and arms trafficking, as well as imposing a 'tax' in exchange for protection, which have become key elements of its transnational criminal activities (Lounnas, 2018).

Indeed, Africa is becoming a hub for the international heroin trade networks, with an integrated 'regional criminal economy', mainly developed in the East African region, enmeshed in a variety of transnational trafficking cartels and criminal governance structures. The 'southern route' connects East and southern Africa to countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and, to a limited extent, North America (Shaw, 2018). According to the UNODC World Drug Report 2023, cocaine trafficking remains crucial in Africa, particularly in West Africa, with North Africa serving as an intersection for inter-regional smuggling of cannabis resin and cannabis (ONUDC, 2023). However, African jihadist groups' businesses have diversified narcotics and smuggling activities to include illegal taxation of natural resources, which accounts for 38% of financing, drugs (28%), seizures and looting (26%), and money extorted from kidnappers for ransom (3%) (Nellemann, 2018).

Narco-jihadism has its roots in the trans-Saharan caravan trade's historical traditions; it was founded on a protection economy through 'razzias', but it persisted during colonial and post-colonial periods before being taken over by the criminal economy and jihadists. Based on the rapid and violent interception of cargo, narco-jihadism represents a new form of post-modern militarised 'razzia' that is widespread throughout the Sahel countries. It redistributes profits to strengthen social and tribal ties, mirroring

the old razzias (The International Crisis Group, 2018). Jihadist governance thus reflects an evolving process from small bands towards proto-state actors and operates under the 'business models' of competitive patron-client organisations (UNDP, 2022). However, the jihadist leaders of the Al-Qaeda factions in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Tuareg in the Sahel were key players in cigarette smuggling activities, particularly Mokhtar Belmokhtar, nicknamed 'Mr. Marlboro' (Le Monde, 2013). Thereby, the 'jihad of the cow' reflects the new cycle of jihadist violence in Africa. On the one hand, it has intensified the economic, political, and religious interweaving in pastoral areas. On the other hand, it has revived the conflictual dynamics around the ethnic references (Zanoletti, 2019) of the 'black jihad' in the Sahel, in particular the Peuls, within the Sahelian subsidiaries of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (Carayol, 2016).

Furthermore, the main features of African terrorism are the rise of the 'jihadisation of banditry', manifested primarily through the theft of livestock from pastoral communities and nomadic herders by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (EIGS) group in north-east Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (Rédaction Africanews & AFP, 2023). Terrorist groups in Africa, including ISIS in West Africa and Boko Haram, exploit environmental vulnerabilities for recruitment and expansion, firstly by exercising control over water resources, particularly in the Lake Chad basin, and secondly by targeting environmentally constrained regions, seizing water resources to restrict access to communities, and using them as weapons (Al Hosani, 2024).

The dangerous multi-cause nexus between extremist violence and environmental degradation has heightened complex security issues and humanitarian crises across Africa (Frimpong, 2020). As a result, the 2023 Ecological Threat Report (ETR) highlighted a significant correlation between the militarisation of jihadists and ecological threats, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). This region has emerged as a hotspot for asymmetrical challenges, with climate change, terrorism, conflict, and transnational crime posing the highest risk (IEP, 2023).

Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State in Somalia: The nexus between 'naval piracy' and 'sea jihad

Despite the dynamic of rivalry and hostility between the Islamic State and Al-Qaida jihadist groups, their common characteristics are more striking than their differences: they share the same political and military credentials (Michael W. S., 2015). However, Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State have adopted an inherent strategy that focuses on a nexus between 'terror, piracy, and criminality' in the Somali province. Hence, Somali piracy and 'maritime terrorism' operate extensively in the Gulf of Aden, spanning the

Horn of Africa, which is a vital shipping lane connecting Asia and Europe, with more than 20,000 ships transiting the region each year (Salkar, 2020).[4]

Somali terrorist groups have adopted a comprehensive doctrinal model to acquire naval capabilities through maritime operations, thereby enhancing the pattern of 'land-based jihadism'. This is in line with Al-Qaeda's establishment of a'maritime jihad section' and the Islamic State's use of the sea to expand its geopolitical influence (Terrom, 2018). Thus, the Jihadists draw their inspiration from the Islamic historical past, when Muslim pirates organised and undertook naval expeditions, particularly in the Mediterranean, which was a haven for piracy activities and the only artery for maritime trade between East and West (Khalilieh, 2019). That's why Somalian jihadists consider the conquest of the sea lanes a religious duty and a vital instrument for asserting Islamic sovereignty over the sea, which constitutes a chessboard for projecting the universality of the Muslim Caliphate, thus justifying razzias under the banner of 'maritime jihad' (Valérian, 2022).

Indeed, 'sea jihad' (Sari, 2015) has created a maritime security deficit off the coast of Somalia and the Gulf of Aden. This has intensified the close ties between transnational risks, ranging from terrorism to piracy, with criminal flows reflecting the militarisation of economic and geopolitical stakes (Péron-Doise, 2016). As a result, the alliance between radical Islamist groups and pirates, who are well-armed and well-versed in the methods of boarding ships on the high seas, has transformed the Horn of Africa into a strategic region for international maritime traffic (Diop, 2010). From this perspective, radical Islamist groups and pirates are collaborating to amass finances, fighters, and weapons with the aim of conquering territory or hijacking ships, forming a type of 'businessman's network' (Ward, 2017). As a result, IS Somalia is collaborating with pirates, specifically Mohamed Garfanje's Hobyo-Haradhere piracy network, who have provided invaluable logistical support (Australian Government, 2022). However, the regional affiliates of Al-Qaeda and ISIS in Somalia have formed alliances with the Houthis in Yemen to disrupt international shipping in the waters of the Red Sea and Bab Al Mandeb, with the aim of exerting pressure on the international community to end Israel's war on Gaza.

To further this objective, the Al-Shabab militants in Sanaag have concluded an agreement with the pirates to provide them with protection in exchange for around 30% of the ransoms received, thereby increasing their sources of funding (Clayton, 2023). Since then, the Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujaahidiin tax-collection machine operates under a double modus operandi, mixing 'mafia-style groups' and 'criminal networks' through its established and efficient 'taxation' apparatus. This system includes transportation (gadiid) taxes on trucks, goods (badeeco) taxes, and agricultural produce (dalag) taxes. While checkpoint taxation accounts for tens of millions of dollars for the militant group on an annual basis, Al-Shabaab also derives its income from other sources,

[4] Projecting power on the seas globally has been done for centuries, and it has clear economic and military benefits (Morgado, 2021).

including forced charitable contributions (zakat), direct extortion from businesses, kidnappings for ransom, and taxation of imports at the port of Mogadishu (Bahadur, 2022).

The post-war situation in Gaza has created a causal link between the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea and the resurgence of pirate attacks in the Indian Ocean, leading to a chaotic crisis of a globalised economy transiting through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal. However, the jihadist orientation of a dual, interdependent geopolitical strategy remains consistent, extending from land to sea. The Al-Shabab group is indirectly supporting pirate groups in Somalia as part of this strategy. In mid-March 2024, the leader of the Houthi rebels, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, announced his intention to extend his attacks to the Indian Ocean, in an area close to piracy zones (Makhlouf & Borer, 2024).

Similarly, since the Hamas attack on Gaza, the type of attack and the resources and capabilities used have intensified and diversified, with substantial weaponry and sophisticated means, as well as navigational skills based on speedboats and motherships (Massias, 2024). The International Maritime Bureau (IMB) reports that acts of maritime piracy off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Guinea are on the rise, demonstrating a growing capability to target ships at long distances, as evidenced by the successful hijacking of a ship in December 2023 (Lamorena, 2024).

Boko Haram gender-based violence: A dualistic militarisation between sexual enslavement and 'nikah Jihad'

'Sexual terrorism' has become a top priority for violent extremist organisations (VEOs) due to the increased transnational activities of groups such as ISIS, Al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram. These groups use CRSV and human trafficking as tactics of jihadist warfare (Paulussen, 2021). On the one hand, sexual violence has emerged as the lethal weapon of Sunni fundamentalist supremacists, mainly directed against unbelievers and apostates classified as enemies. On the other hand, sexual enslavement has targeted exclusively women, children, and religious minorities, reflecting a certain ethno-sectarian hierarchy that undeniably reflects an archaic vision of hyper-masculinity designed exclusively to strengthen the bonds of solidarity between jihadist movements (Ahram, 2015).

Boko Haram has also used rape and sexual slavery as a strategy to draw in new members, promoting 'getting closer to God' through the sex slave trade and 'nikah jihad' (Esfandiari, 2015). The term 'nikah jihad' refers to the alleged practice of Sunni women offering themselves emotionally and physically in sexual comfort roles to fighters aiming to establish Islamic rule. However, 'nikah al-Mut'ah' (simply mut'ah or 'temporary marriage'), which was widely practiced in Shia communities during the early history of Islam, has deeply influenced the Islamic State (Grami, 2018). As a war strategy and an integral part of the political economy of the conflict, other forms of forced,

temporary, and early marriage and prostitution have revived and institutionalised this practice (OCHA, 2015). However, UNODC data from 2023 shows that non-state armed groups, such as Al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates, are involved in transnational crimes such as illegal financial flows (IFFs), smuggling of migrants (SOM), and trafficking in persons across borders in West Africa (UNODC, 2023).

'Gender-based violence' (GBV) has become an integral part of Boko Haram's asymmetric tactics in northeast Nigeria. This is primarily due to the exhaustion of its fighters and the loss of territory, which has led them to carry out targeted attacks on schools and feminine institutions with the aim of abducting and kidnapping women and young girls (Adeyanju, 2020). Rape, armed abduction, forced marriage, captivity, and abuse of women are vital components of the Boko Haram strategy. The group's gendered tactics consist of weaponising them as instruments and objects of war, such as sex slaves, human shields, and suicide bombers (Okoli, 2022). More significantly, gender in Boko Haram's ideology and culture has focused exclusively on the forced imposition of Shari'a law, facilitating gender-based violence through rigidly gendered ideological structures. Consequently, the insurgents view women, particularly Christian women, as legitimate targets, justifying their abduction and rape as a form of sexual 'jizya', an Islamic law-imposed tax on Christians (Zenn, 2014).

Meanwhile, Boko Haram views women as symbols of swords in its terror strategy; hence, it has used them in a dualistic operational process, partly by bargaining chips with government forces and by involving them in coordinated attacks to maintain a presence in urban areas (Bloom, 2016). More than 8 million civilians have experienced gender-based violence since the abduction of 250 Chibok female students in 2014 in Borno State. This violence has spread to Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and the Lake Chad region, leading to alliances with the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (Charles Aniekwe, 2024). Between 2011 and 2018, 434 Boko Haram suicide bombers in the Lake Chad Basin were detected (Warner & Matfess, 2017). Since 2022, incidents of human trafficking and kidnapping perpetrated by Boko Haram, JNIM, and the Islamic State's Sahel Province (ISSP) have intensified in the Sahel, which has become a springboard for expansion into the coastal states of West Africa. Indeed, in 2023, the prevalence of kidnapping, forced recruitment, and kidnapping for ransom as a flexible source of income doubled. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project's data indicates that these VEOs are accountable for more than 80% of the 78 reported kidnappings in this region between 2022 and 2023 (GI-TOC, 2024).

African sustainable counter-terrorism: seeking solutions for global pathologies

Given that the jihadist threat is a chronic pathology with multidimensional consequences for African security, there is an absolute imperative to develop a sustained response based on soft governance to counter terrorism and prevent violent extremism and

radicalisation linked to narco-jihadism, maritime jihad, and sexual terrorism (see Diagram 3 drawn up by the author).

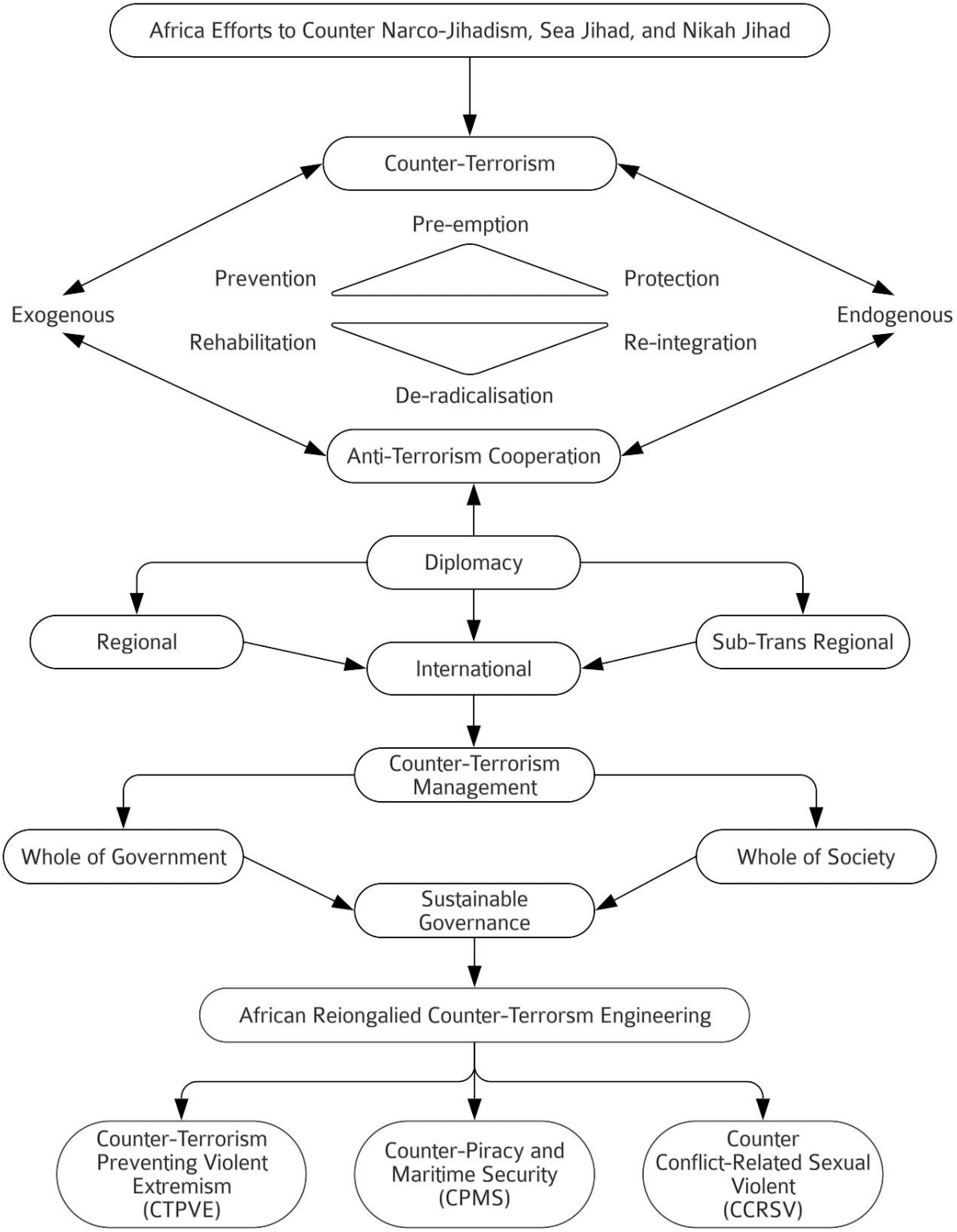

Figure 3: African efforts to counter Narco-Jihadism, Sea Jihad, and Nikah Jihad. Enhancing African regional governance and sustainable security architectures to counter 'narco-jihadism'. Source: Author.

In 1999, the African Union (AU) initiated its counter-transnational terrorism efforts by adopting the 'AU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism' as a common legislative framework. An 'Additional Protocol' in 2004 enhanced this, defining the role of AU institutions responsible for implementing anti-terrorism instruments on regional and international levels. Since then, in 2010, the AU has appointed a Special Representative for Counter-Terrorism, and in 2011, the AU Assembly adopted the African Model Law on Counter-Terrorism to assist states in harmonising legislation on terrorism (UNOAU, 2015). The Assembly, Executive Council, and Pan-African Parliament are among the AU's institutions and organs in charge of countering terrorism (Ewi, 2006). Therefore, the 'AU Commission' and the 'Peace and Security Department' (PSD) solely have authority over the CT to strengthen regional mechanisms for monitoring the execution of counter-terrorism decisions.

The 'Peace and Security Council' (PSC) is in charge of harmonising and coordinating operations under the 'African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)', which includes the 'Defense and Security Division' (DSD) and a counter-terrorism subcommittee. As a result, the 'African Centre for Study and Research on Terrorism' (ACSRT) emerged in 2004 to help AU member states build their counter-terrorism capacity by conducting research, analysis, and studies on terrorism, as well as maintaining a database for centralising, sharing, and evaluating information. Meanwhile, the AU police cooperation mechanism (AFRIPOL) intensified the operationalisation of the fight against 'criminal jihadists' (NKALWO NGOULA, 2016). On the one hand, the African Union police cooperation mechanism (AFRIPOL) maintains strong partnerships with African regional police chief organisations. On the other hand, it also collaborates with the Committee on Intelligence and Security Services in Africa (CISSA) (AFRIPOL, n.d.; Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, GIZ, 2024) to counter transnational threats and prevent the territorial regression of criminal networks and terrorist organisations.

Africa has been particularly vulnerable to links with terrorist groups and organised crime. In response, the AU's strategy has focused on addressing the root causes of these interrelated and destabilising challenges (UNODC, n.d.). On the one hand, 'Regional Economic Communities' (RECs) are at the heart of the AU's anti-terrorism cooperation, primarily with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the 'Lake Chad Basin Commission' (LCBC), and the 'Intergovernmental Authority on Development' (IGAD) within the 'Capacity Building Programme against Terrorism' (ICPAT) (Ayalew Demeke, 2014). However, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), with its regional counter-terrorism centre, is coordinating and

strengthening the response to terrorism (SADC, n.d.). On the other hand, the African Union has focused on 'soft measures' and non-binding policies to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE), with democratisation, education, and mechanisms to prevent African youth from radicalisation (Abdelssami, 2019).

High-level consultations with various UN agencies, such as the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee (UN-CTC) and the UNODC Terrorism Prevention Branch (AU, 2014), govern cooperation at the international level. In line with Security Council Resolution 2195, Africa is actively addressing the connections between transnational organised crime and terrorism. This is being done in close collaboration with the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (GCTF) and in coordination with UNICRI, specifically focusing on The Hague's best practices on these links (UNICRI, 2021). Since then, in 2023, UNODC and UNICRI launched a new project on the nexus between terrorism and organised crime in Africa, funded by the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund (UNPDTF), with scoping missions and the development of a technical assistance plan with key stakeholders and agencies involved in the fight against organised crime and terrorism in Algeria, Benin, Mali, and Togo, respectively (UNICRI, 2023).

For its part, the UNODC branch responsible for combating transnational organised crime is active as a sub-regional programme for East Africa (2016–2021). While AIRCOP aims to strengthen the capacity of international airports to detect and intercept high-risk passengers, including foreign terrorist fighters, illicit drugs, and other illicit commodities, UNODC's Law Enforcement, Organized Crime, and Anti-Money Laundering unit also operates in East Africa (UNODC, n.d.).

In the face of these problems, African policies need creative and innovative approaches within a sustainable counter-terrorism strategy, including institutional architecture, development, and social justice (Makinda, 2006). This is why 'citizen-centered governance', which was previously downgraded to approaches based on the Joint Multinational Force (JMMF), peacekeeping operations, and the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery, and Resilience (RS-SRR) (Eizenga & Gnanguênon, 2024), is the missing piece in African regionalised counter-terrorism engineering. Indeed, sustainable counter-terrorism, which is considered a comprehensive dynamic management that encompasses local, regional, national, and international levels, is the solution for African narcoterrorism (Haimes, 2004). This necessitates the integration of 'whole-of-government' and 'whole-of-society' approaches, as well as non-traditional governance with primarily non-kinetic and low-kinetic strategies that connect the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE), violent extremist organisations (VEOs), and counter-terrorism (CT) (Palacios, 2024).

Rethinking regional and global counter piracy and maritime security (CPMS)

The African Union Transitional Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), formerly known as the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), has been actively working to defeat the jihadist Al-Shabaab since 2022. As a result, the Somali army is leading the charge in cooperation against terrorism with local clans and support from other regional countries (The International Crisis Group, 2023). There are also national and regional anti-piracy and maritime security operations (PM/CPMS) in the Horn of Africa (US Department of State, DoS, n.d.a). These include the EU Naval Force in Somalia, Operation Atalanta, conducted by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as part of the Standing Naval Maritime Group, and Operation Ocean Shield, conducted by the Allied Task Force. However, the EU, AU, League of Arab States, and NATO coordinate trans-regional anti-piracy cooperation measures (World Bank, 2013). Meanwhile, on the international front, specialised institutions oversee anti-piracy operations in this region, with the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), and the Piracy Reporting Center playing key roles (*Atlas Magazine*, 2022).

In addition to these initiatives, UN Security Council Resolution 1851 formed the basis for the creation of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) in 2009 (US DoS, n.d.b). Established in 2012 in response to Security Council Resolution S/RES/1851, the Counter-Piracy Trust Fund serves as the focal point for international efforts to combat piracy off the coast of Somalia (Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, 2024). In 2022, the Somali Police Force (SPF) Department of Coast Guard had a new, cutting-edge facility for counterpiracy and armed robbery along the Somali coastline, originally created by the United Nations (UN) and sponsored by the EU (The Maritime Executive, 2022).

With a view to countering piracy as a multidimensional threat, African efforts must preserve the seas from armed interference and allow free and safe transit in international waterways. Similarly, regional cooperation must expand the size and scope of the maritime information fusion centers and enhance maritime domain awareness (MDA) with subregional maritime rescue coordination centers (MRRC) in accordance with the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Blaine, 2024; Romaniuk & Kaunert, 2024). The 'root causes' of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea region of West and East Africa are widespread poverty, governmental failure, and the fallout from illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

These factors fuel the piracy epidemic. As a result, a regional and international 'collaborative approach' is the only way to tackle maritime insecurity and put an end to piracy (ADF, 2023). The international community's efforts to stop piracy in Africa have slowly changed from a military focus to a new set of concerns that started with 'top-down' and now include 'bottom-up' issues as well. These include building up people's skills as part of all-around cooperation (GUILFOYLE, 2010), which connects fighting piracy on land with protecting the seas and promoting regional growth (Winn, 2017).

An integrated approach to counter sexual terrorism and CRSV

Internationally, the criminal justice process has marginalised and placed victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) on the periphery. However, the efforts of international bodies and criminal tribunals, particularly the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Mbazira, 2014), have profoundly changed this. On the other hand, Security Council Resolutions 2253 of December 17, 2015 (UNSC, 2015) and 2331 of December 20, 2016 (UNSC, 2016) have propelled the sexual terrorism of ISIS, Al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram to the forefront of the international agenda and strongly condemned it.

The AU's policy responses to persistent sexual violence are primarily based on the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA), which is a protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. Although the AU deals extensively with conflict-related rape, it does not recognise its use by jihadist groups as a strategic weapon. This is controversial because the AU treated rape and gender-based violence as a symptom of conflict, providing an inadequate response to the problem (Langeveldt, 2014). In this regard, the Women, Gender, and Youth Directorate (WGYD) is currently developing the AU framework for the elimination of violence against women and girls, as well as sexual violence in conflict situations. This framework is based on a 'rights-based approach' that emphasises prevention, advocacy, and mobilisation, in line with Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development Goals (AU, 2021).

The Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts reinforce counter-insurgency (COIN). The Peace Restoration and Peacebuilding Assessment (RPBA), which frames gender as a cross-cutting theme and includes gender-based violence (OCHA, 2017), is filling gaps in the role of women in post-conflict peace reconstruction. Meanwhile, the Nigerian Operation Safe Corridor programme has implemented a de-radicalisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DRR) approach for former Boko Haram fighters and women victims of sexual violence (Ugwueze, 2022).

As part of the humanitarian approach in jihadist conflict zones, cooperation between the UN and the Nigerian government has made it possible to provide support for victims of kidnapping and violence by former Boko Haram captives. This support includes clinical care for rape victims and psychosocial support for the social and economic reintegration of victims of terrorism (OSRSGSVC, n.d.), which is part of a systematic and multidimensional programme in post-Boko Haram peace processes (Obisesan, 2023). The prosecution of acts of sexual and gender-based violence committed by terrorists must focus more on a victim-centered approach that serves both the victims and the state's counter-terrorism strategies. However, despite the African commitment to the UN strategy and the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), which adopted

resolution A/RES/77/298, the impact of the resolutions in practice remains limited (Siampakou, 2023).

Conclusion

After scrutinising Africa's transformation into a 'glocal terrorist hub' through multi-dimensional jihadism, including narco-terrorism, maritime piracy, and sexual slavery, it is clear that a comprehensive interpretive understanding that focuses on a root-cause approach should be a high priority at the intellectual level and at the operational level of post-modern and sustainable counter-terrorism. On the one hand, religious fanaticism primarily stems from an archaic and extremist worldview that distinguishes between near and far enemies. Endogenous factors such as state failure, poverty, economic insecurity, and political instability, which are the founding principles of the jihadist matrix, partially fuel this phenomenon.

Exogenous factors, however, are significant determinants, notably the colonial past and foreign interventions, which are incubators for the proliferation of African jihadism. While local affiliates of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are rational actors taking advantage of globalisation to expand their sphere of influence and exploit the international situation to their advantage, particularly in the current context of the war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas since October 2023, there is a certain entente between Somali pirates, Al-Shabab, and the Houthis in Yemen.

The regional branches of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Africa are charting an operational trajectory as part of a triptych of 'narco-terrorism', 'naval piracy', and 'nikah jihad'. At the same time, these jihadist groups have adopted a dual process of transnationalisation and hybridisation, indicating a very high degree of adaptability to changing circumstances. Furthermore, they have emerged as pragmatic players and business models in the highly specialised sector of internationalised terrorist action. The Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims focuses on narco-jihadism and banditry as a sort of post-modern razzia, while Al-Shabab and the Islamic State in Somalia have developed a triangular connection between jihadism, piracy, and organised crime under the banner of Jihad of the Sea. Meanwhile, Boko Haram and the Islamic State's affiliates in the Great Sahara and West African provinces have adopted the militarisation of sexual terrorism, kidnappings, and the exploitation of captive women under the guise of 'nikah jihad' as their primary war terror strategy.

Despite Africa's efforts to combat terrorism and prevent violent extremism, jihadism persists in its proliferation. Therefore, we must address the core causes of the jihadist problem, starting with a committed understanding, discrediting radicalised doctrines through early prevention, and increasing mobilisation through a moderate discourse and counter-ideology. At the operational level, it is essential to focus on innovative and

holistic approaches, but also on the collective commitment of all counter-terrorism actors and civil society. This is why partnership and multidimensional cooperation must be at the heart of African concrete responses. Conversely, by strengthening African legal, institutional, and regional cooperation within the AU's security architectures, sustainable solutions based on soft governance can effectively combat 'narco-jihadism'.

Ultimately, this ought to be framed by anti-terrorism diplomacy, including bilateral and multilateral coordination at the regional and international levels to CPMS, coupled with an overhaul of the fight against sexual terrorism and CRSV with new approaches focused on victims and human rights.

Conflict of interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

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