

Book Review: Palgrave Handbook of Terrorism in Africa¹²

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The study of terrorism in Africa has often been shaped by external narratives that emphasise *insecurity*, *instability*, and *institutional weakness*. While these perspectives capture important elements of the continent's security challenges, they can also obscure the complex political, historical, and social conditions that shape the emergence and evolution of extremist movements. The *Palgrave Handbook of Terrorism in Africa*, edited by Rohan Gunaratna and C. Nna-Emeka Okereke, addresses this complexity by providing a broad examination of terrorism across the continent. As a substantial edited collection bringing together regional analyses, country studies, and thematic discussions, the handbook serves both as a useful reference work and as an intervention in debates about how terrorism and violent extremism in Africa should be understood.

Rather than presenting Africa simply as a theatre for international terrorist groups, the volume brings together regional, country-level, and thematic analyses that explore terrorism as a phenomenon shaped by local political conditions, regional conflicts, governance challenges, ideological movements, and global security dynamics. Its central contribution is its rejection of simplistic explanations of terrorism across the continent. Africa does not experience a single form of terrorism with a single set of causes. The volume takes a different approach: extremist movements emerge from different combinations of historical grievances, political exclusion, state fragility, economic marginalisation, identity-based tensions, and transnational ideological influences. By bringing together a diverse collection of regional and country-focused analyses, the editors present terrorism as a diverse political and social phenomenon rather than a uniform security challenge.

The structure of the *Palgrave Handbook of Terrorism in Africa* captures the complexity of the subject it examines. The editors adopt a broad comparative approach, combining thematic analysis with detailed studies of specific regions and countries. This structure is well suited to the subject because violent extremism in Africa varies considerably depending on historical experience, political institutions, regional dynamics, and the presence of different terrorist groups and organisations.

The handbook's geographical breadth is a major strength. Organised across six

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substantive parts, the volume examines Central Africa; East and the Horn of Africa; North Africa; Southern Africa; and West Africa and the Sahel, before concluding with a section devoted to reflections and prognosis. The country-focused chapters cover a broad selection of cases, including Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, Somaliland and Puntland, Uganda, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria. This geographical breadth allows the volume to move beyond the concentration of much terrorism research on a relatively small number of high-profile cases, while enabling comparison across different forms of political violence, state capacity, regional conflict, and terrorist mobilisation. For scholars, this provides a broader empirical basis for identifying both recurring patterns and context-specific dynamics; for students, it illustrates the diversity of pathways through which terrorism emerges and develops; and for practitioners, it highlights the importance of understanding terrorist movements within their particular political and social environments.

The regional organisation of the handbook is one of its greatest strengths. The regional analyses reveal substantial variation in the nature and drivers of terrorism across Africa. The security dynamics of the Sahel differ from those of the Horn of Africa, North Africa, Central Africa, and other regions. Although recurring themes run throughout the book, including governance challenges, contested state legitimacy, political grievances, and the influence of international extremist networks, the contributors capture how differently these factors interact across local contexts.

This approach challenges the tendency to treat 'African terrorism' as one interconnected problem. While terrorist groups may share ideological influences, recruitment strategies, or operational links, they operate within distinct political and social environments. The handbook's structure allows readers to appreciate both common patterns and important differences between cases, providing a more nuanced understanding of why extremist movements emerge, adapt, and persist.

The editors bring well-suited expertise to such an ambitious project. Professor Rohan Gunaratna brings extensive expertise in terrorism studies, counterterrorism, intelligence, and the development of transnational extremist networks. His research has examined the organisational structures, strategies, and international connections of terrorist movements, offering a sharper understanding of how local conflicts can become connected to wider global security challenges.

Dr. C. Nna-Emeka Okereke contributes complementary expertise through his work on African security, governance, conflict dynamics, and regional approaches to counterterrorism. His perspective helps situate the study of terrorism in Africa within its political and historical contexts, while broadening the analysis beyond predominantly external security frameworks. This combination of global terrorism expertise and Africa-focused analysis strengthens the handbook's ability to connect international security debates with local realities.

The editors represent two essential dimensions of contemporary terrorism research: the global nature of extremist networks and the local conditions that allow such movements to emerge. Their combined expertise provides an appropriate foundation for a volume seeking to explain both the international and regional dimensions of terrorism across Africa.

One of the handbook's most important contributions is its emphasis on context-specific analysis. Terrorism is often discussed through broad global categories, but the contributors show how deeply extremist movements are shaped by the political environments in which they operate. The volume highlights how weak institutions, contested legitimacy, corruption, unresolved conflicts, and social grievances can create opportunities for extremist organisations to gain influence. However, it avoids reducing terrorism simply to 'state failure', instead showing that political violence develops through the interaction of multiple social, historical, and institutional factors.

This is important because it moves beyond explanations that portray African states as inherently unstable. Instead, the handbook emphasises processes: how political exclusion, conflict, governance failures, and external pressures combine over time to shape insecurity. Terrorist organisations do not simply appear in areas of instability; they exploit existing tensions, build networks, adapt their strategies, and attempt to influence local communities.

Another major strength of the volume is the importance it places on regional expertise. Research on African security has sometimes been criticised for relying heavily on external interpretations that overlook local perspectives. The handbook benefits from contributors whose analyses are grounded in knowledge of African political and security environments. This strengthens the empirical value of the collection and helps prevent the continent from being treated as a single security problem.

The handbook also provides an important historical perspective. Contemporary terrorism in Africa is examined within longer political and security trajectories, including post-colonial developments, civil conflicts, international counter-terrorism campaigns after the September 11 attacks, political upheaval in North Africa, and the expansion of organisations associated with global jihadist movements. This historical approach demonstrates that extremist violence is not an isolated development but the outcome of evolving political conditions.

A further contribution of the handbook is its broader discussion of counter-terrorism policy. Although the volume examines terrorist organisations and security responses, several of its analyses highlight the limitations of approaches focused exclusively on military or intelligence measures. Across different cases, contributors draw attention to governance, political legitimacy, social inclusion, and community resilience as factors shaping the persistence or decline of extremist movements. The implication is that counterterrorism cannot be understood independently of the political and social environments in which terrorist organisations operate.

The scale of the project inevitably creates a tension between breadth and depth. Covering terrorism across an entire continent requires difficult choices regarding which cases and themes receive attention. The individual chapters provide valuable insights, but the diversity of cases also makes comparative synthesis challenging.

The handbook does attempt to address this challenge through its final section, 'Reflections and Prognosis', culminating in a substantial concluding chapter by the editors on Africa's emergence as a global centre of terrorist activity. This provides an important opportunity to draw together the preceding regional and country-level analyses. Nevertheless, the synthesis could have gone further in developing a comparative theoretical framework that explains why similar pressures produce different forms of terrorist mobilisation across African contexts. The volume is strongest in showing how these dynamics vary across contexts; its theoretical contribution would have been even more substantial had the concluding discussion systematically transformed that variation into a more explicit comparative argument.

The volume also invites a broader question concerning what it means to describe Africa as an 'epicentre' of global terrorism. The contributors document the expansion and persistence of terrorist activity across several regions, as well as the connections between local conflicts and transnational jihadist organisations. Yet the concept of an 'epicentre' can encompass several different phenomena, including the geographic concentration of attacks, organisational expansion, the strategic importance of African theatres to transnational movements, and the growing significance of African conflicts within international counter-terrorism agendas. Distinguishing among these dimensions would provide greater analytical precision and help clarify whether the changing geography of terrorism represents primarily a shift in the location of violence, a transformation in terrorist organisational structures, or both.

A further issue concerns the definition of terrorism itself. The concept remains contested, particularly when applied across different historical and political contexts. While the handbook provides extensive empirical analysis, a deeper discussion of the relationship between terrorism, insurgency, rebellion, and political violence would have strengthened the theoretical contribution of the work. Since the classification of violence as 'terrorism' carries political and analytical consequences, greater reflection on terminology would have added further depth.

These issues point to a broader limitation of the handbook: its empirical breadth is not always matched by an equally systematic theoretical integration. The volume could have done more to connect its recurring concepts and themes into a coherent framework for explaining variation in terrorist mobilisation across different African contexts. The scale of the project also produces some inevitable unevenness in analytical depth, conceptual orientation, and engagement with comparative questions. This is understandable in a collection spanning an entire continent, but it means that the handbook is ultimately stronger as a rich empirical reference work than as a tightly integrated theoretical study. Greater attention to the conceptual boundaries between terrorism, insurgency, rebellion, and political violence would also have strengthened its

analytical coherence, particularly given the diversity of cases examined.

The volume also raises important questions about the balance between security and development approaches. Counter-terrorism efforts require effective security institutions, but the handbook demonstrates that long-term stability is also shaped by broader political and social conditions. Governance reform, inclusion, economic opportunity, and state legitimacy are not separate from security concerns; they are central to understanding why extremist movements emerge and how they can be challenged.

The *Palgrave Handbook of Terrorism in Africa* is an important contribution to the study of terrorism, African politics, and international security. Its greatest achievement is demonstrating that terrorism across the continent cannot be explained through a single narrative or addressed through a universal solution. Instead, the volume presents terrorism as a complex phenomenon shaped by the interaction of local political realities and global security dynamics.

For students, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, the handbook offers useful references and substantive insights into one of the most significant security challenges facing Africa. Its emphasis on regional diversity, African expertise, and the relationship between security and governance makes it useful in challenging simplistic assumptions about terrorism on the continent.

The lasting value of *Palgrave Handbook of Terrorism in Africa* lies not only in documenting terrorist movements and security responses, but in showing how deeply terrorism is shaped by its political and social context. The volume makes a strong case for looking beyond broad external narratives and paying closer attention to the histories, political conditions, and local dynamics that shape terrorism across Africa.