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Dear Fellow Africanists/Researchers and Africa Enthusiasts,

The 2026/2 issue of the Journal of Central and Eastern European African Studies has finally arrived. True to our creed and traditions, this new edition contains the usual themes and some exciting new ideas on the history, security policy and economy of Africa. Terrorism, global warming, economic problems and philosophical issues regarding Africa (“afropessimism”) are all subjects of the journal’s new articles. Therefore, it is clear that the articles in this issue convey messages that will draw attention. When I look at the new edition, I am sure that some of the articles will be innovative and will bring new scientific results. Besides, I sincerely hope that through this the fresh issue of our journal will be able to contribute to the ongoing scientific discourse regarding Africa. Regarding the content of the issue, it seems certain that alongside conventional analyses, innovative and unconventional views will be introduced, and the readers will be delighted to engage with such interesting and thought-provoking analyses.

The first article concerns an issue that is very popular these days: the cybersecurity matters of Africa are discussed by Károly Kassai. As we learn, the cybersecurity programmes of these countries are nation-based; however, the African Union tries to assist the member states in developing successful cybersecurity strategies. There is also an initiative called African Union Cybersecurity Strategy that – according to estimates – is going to be a game changer for the future of the phenomenon. As one of the most interesting articles, this paper will be worth reading.

The second text takes into consideration a well-known but rarely researched philosophical concept, the so-called “afropessimism”. İlhan Aras examines the negative views regarding Africa’s relevance. By taking this stance, some of the researchers state that Africa has no future and the continent is unworthy of trust. This negative view is fortunately not so popular, and the overall perceptions of the continent are more positive, however, this movement, as a philosophical trend, has gained some kind of recognition among academics.

In the following four papers, several writers examine the notion of security thoroughly. Firstly, Buyisile Ntaka scrutinises the relation between the security situation in the Sahel states (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) and the G20 countries. The subject has recently become very popular among Africanists, since the bulk of terrorist activity and security challenges has shifted to this part of Africa in recent years. The article concerns the way in which the terrorist activity is addressed by G20 participants such as France and the European Union, and it tries to provide possible solutions to these problems.

In the fourth article, Ilas Touazi explores security in the Lake Chad Basin. The exciting theme of terrorism in the Sahel is again scrutinised, with the terrorist organizations Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda and ISIS brought into focus, as these organisations recently began to take control of water infrastructure of this area and cause a severe security dilemma. The actual devastation of water supplies by extremists is a rather new phenomenon, which raises concern regarding the already scanty water supply capacity that characterises the area at hand.

The fifth paper interprets the problem of security as well and tries to elaborate on so-called early warning systems that could help to reduce the potential dangers caused by these threats in the



affected territories. The humanitarian and security challenges are so severe – according to the authors, Al Chukwuma Okoli and Chika Eucharia Eze – that these early warning systems would be able to detect the forthcoming terrorist attacks, thereby reducing the threat caused by the radicals.

The following article still examines terrorism and security. Siyakudumisa Zicina discusses the characteristics of the Salafist-Jihadist movement in Mozambique. The South African wing of the radical network remains under-researched; thus, the present article can be regarded as an innovative approach to the subject of extremist movements. The situation in Cabo Delgado, the Northern province of Mozambique is important for analysis as well because the terrorist organizations here not only threaten the environment but also create government structures which seem to be interesting for conducting modern scientific analysis of these structures.

In the seventh paper, István Pál and Abdallah Abdel-Ati Al-Naggar examines the Cold War relations between Egypt and Hungary through correspondence between two former diplomats, Osman Fawzi and Hassan Maher. They both served in Hungary in the middle of the 20th century. Their communication methods and their use of protocol rules serve as a living example for future generations of how polite interstate communication took place between the countries.

The eighth text is written by Oscar Mujana and Cosmas T. Shoko. The interesting article evaluates the current financial situation of African economies and banks; how they can adapt to modern trade life. The paper also assesses the exposure of these financial institutions to the political and financial developments that govern Africa and the international, global banking sphere. A careful analysis of this article may bring us closer to understanding the financial capabilities of the African countries.

The ninth article describes the activities and cultural heritage of the Atswean-Asi people of Kwambai, who live in Taraba, Nigeria. Yaweh Filibus argues that the mixture of cultures in this area of Nigeria shows the significant changes and diversity that exists in the characteristics of contemporary communities of the country. The various religious traditions converging in one traditionalist belief illustrate the frequent blending of Christian/Muslim and traditional faiths.

The tenth paper takes into consideration the important issue of gender equality in Biafra, Nigeria, a phenomenon that raises concern in modern society. The author, Samuel Edet, interprets the change in attitudes toward gender-based discrimination in 2023: according to the paper, after which gender inequality began to change slowly and currently more and more freedom is given to women and marginalised groups in modern Nigerian society.

The eleventh analysis considers Nigeria's intelligence capabilities in the modern era. The main problem – according to Obinna Ukaeje – with the national security apparatus is that the political interests penetrate the intelligence sphere and this way the capabilities of the organisation are undermined. The prioritization of the security of political parties and prominent political figures hinders the effectiveness of the services.

The twelfth paper written by Esson Alumbugu, Damian Akut and Julia O. Ogbaji treats the Ombatse movement and its characteristics in Eggonland. This group believes in a mixture of elements from animist beliefs, Christianity or Islam and the ideology of this group is the moral purification of the Eggon people from ethical misdeeds. The point of the analysis is that these groupings not only



support the local community but sometimes join the terrorist forces as well which creates a complex social and cultural environment that deserves a thorough analysis.

Arriving at the first of the book reviews, I can only recommend them as well. Buyisile Ntaka writes about an extraordinary book entitled *Comrades Beyond the Cold War: North Korea and the Liberation of Southern Africa*. The work is about how and why North Korea decided to help South Africa between 1960 and 2020. This assistance was repaid in several ways by the Southern country. According to the book, the North Korean and the South African political elites mutually assisted each other, and this cooperation has continued to exist since then.

Marcell Pintér, who discusses the following book, writes the second review: *China's Footprint in East Africa – Pessimism versus Optimism*. The author presents the main points of the book at the beginning: how and what China has contributed to the African landscape and politics in the eastern part of the continent. The popular theme remains interesting up to this very day and Pintér plays with our imagination to prove that this thought is right.

Thirdly, Tímea Hillender's review the book entitled *Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Youth Entrepreneurship: Recentring the Voices of Marginalized Communities in Africa*. The writing concerns a very important and sad problem in Africa: unemployment. As we learn from the author, the first part of the book takes into consideration methodological questions, whereas the second part turns to case studies to explain the difficulties of this phenomenon.

Fourthly, Zsolt Szabó reviews a book on South African soldiers' military manoeuvres in the World War II. The book is entitled *Jan Smuts's Boys: The Wartime Experiences of the Men of the 2nd South African Infantry Division, 1940-1945*. The book's essence is that the soldiers and the difficulties they faced during the war are explained to us from a bottom-up perspective (diaries, notes, publications) and the author tries to provide a relatively comprehensive picture on the exhausted soldiers in an exceptionally brutal war.

Last but not least Scott N. Romaniuk reviews a much-needed work: the *Palgrave Handbook of Terrorism in Africa*. This important edition not only examines terrorism as an international phenomenon, but it looks at local samples and units to give a more ample picture on the subject that threatens the peace of Africa and its inhabitants as well.

In conclusion, let me tell you, Dear Readers, that the goal of the JCEEAS journal is to provide you with the most interesting articles and reviews, which are related to the most recent trends of scholarly discourse on Africa. While the issue is centred on security concerns, several other eye-catching texts have been presented in the journal. Taking a look at these papers, I sincerely hope that our intentions have been successful and readers of all backgrounds, whether academic or general, will enjoy reading these analyses.

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Key Issues in Addressing Cybersecurity Challenges on the African Continent¹

Károly Kassai²

Abstract:

This study examines the strategic-level characteristics of the cybersecurity frameworks within African Union Member States. While cybersecurity remains under national jurisdiction, the African Union holds the responsibility to support Member States in developing and maintaining their national capabilities. The paper evaluates the cybersecurity requirements established by the Malabo Convention and presents the supplementary initiatives and programs designed to support its implementation. By detailing the specific elements of national cybersecurity frameworks, the study provides a comprehensive assessment of the current landscape. Finally, the analysis of continental-level organizational structures highlights the key components of strategic and operational support. The overview emphasizes the critical role of the forthcoming African Union Cybersecurity Strategy, as well as the significance of measurement and feedback mechanisms that objectively reflect political-strategic decision-making and practical implementation.

Keywords:

Cybersecurity; Cyber-Governance; Malabo Convention; Security Requirements; National Responsibility.

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Introduction

In recent years, cybersecurity and cyberthreats have gained significant prominence in both international news and professional discourse. Illustrative of this trend is the EU Network and Information Security Directive (NIS2 Directive), which established general cybersecurity requirements in 2022, followed by the publication of its implementing regulations in 2024. Subsequent, more specialized instruments include the Cyber Resilience Act (CRA), which sets specifications for manufacturers; the Cyber Solidarity Act, aimed at collective defence and resource-sharing among Member States; and the AI Act, which focuses on the robustness and security of artificial intelligence systems.

While these requirements strengthen the European cybersecurity ecosystem, relatively limited attention has been paid to the African Union's recent ratification (in 2024) of the Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection (the „Malabo Convention”).

Just as the economies, digital infrastructures, and cybersecurity frameworks of European states are heterogeneous, this diversity is equally characteristic of the African continent, albeit with additional, distinct regional features. These specific African characteristics necessitate a strategic-level mapping of the cybersecurity landscape. At this stage, rather than a granular analysis, the objective is to identify the most pertinent cybersecurity elements, enabling readers to discern the area's most relevant to their interests.

The aim of this study is to examine how continental-level framework regulations and support mechanisms provide tools for the development and maintenance of national cybersecurity frameworks. This research is guided by the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis: The cybersecurity frameworks of African countries must be bolstered through balanced, strategic-level procedural and organizational support. This assumption implies that a purely digitalization-driven approach and the exclusive reliance on technical solutions are insufficient for effective resilience.

The study employs qualitative policy research method. This analysis used to explore the regulatory frameworks and measures shaping cybersecurity on the African continent and to identify national-level support organisations. Qualitative policy analysis is supported by a structured comparative inventory, specifically demonstrating the implementation of requirements across the continent.

While economic, financial, and political factors significantly influence a country's cybersecurity posture, this study intentionally abstracts from these variables to focus exclusively on specific cybersecurity issues.

The data collection for this research was concluded on 1 December 2025.

The first chapter identifies the cybersecurity requirements of the African continent and the core elements of the African Union's support programs. The second chapter

provides a brief overview based on selected characteristics, followed by a final chapter offering a high-level synthesis of the relevant supporting organizations.

1. Strategic Context and Cybersecurity Requirements

The Constitutive Act of the African Union serves as the highest-level regulatory instrument, providing the foundational basis for subsequent cybersecurity regulations. The Union's objectives are underpinned by key principles, including sovereign equality, peace and security, the rule of law, human rights, and continental cooperation (African Union, 2000, pp. Art. 3-4.).

This mandate provides the necessary legitimacy to establish continental action frameworks and to advance regulatory harmonization in the field of cybersecurity, thereby supporting the stability and development of Member States.

Building on the high-level objectives of the Constitutive Act, the primary continental regulatory instrument for cybersecurity and data protection is the „Malabo Convention.” Adopted in 2014 following several years of negotiation (ALT Advisory, 2022) the Convention entered into force on 8 June 2023, after ratification by the fifteenth Member State, Mauritania (Kaaniru, 2023).

Despite the lengthy adoption process, the Convention represents a critical turning point for African data protection and cybersecurity, signalling a formal commitment from Member States (Ayalew, 2023).

The Convention establishes a comprehensive legal framework aimed at strategically harmonizing three key areas: enhancing trust in electronic transactions, creating a legal foundation for combating cybercrime while strengthening cybersecurity, and establishing a fundamental framework for personal data protection (African Union, 2014). Furthermore, it defines requirements according to key cybersecurity considerations, which Member States are expected to implement based on their voluntary commitments.

Topic	Requirement	Reference (African Union, 2014)
National Strategy	Development of a national cybersecurity policy and strategy	Article 24
R&D Support	Support for research and development of cybersecurity technologies and solutions	Article 24(1)
Responsible National Authority	Designation of a competent national authority responsible for cybersecurity	Article 25(1) – (2)(f))
National Data Protection Authority (DPA)	Establishment/designation of a National Data Protection Authority	Article 11
National Incident Response Organization (CERT/CIRT)	Establishment/designation of a national Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT/CIRT)	Article 26(1), (3)
Combating Cybercrime	Creation of a legal framework for criminal sanctions against electronic offenses	Articles 28–35

Topic	Requirement	Reference (African Union, 2014)
Cyber Sovereignty	Establishment of a legal framework to exercise jurisdiction over cybercrimes committed within the territory	Article 29(1)
Cyber Resilience	Development of resilience in national systems	Articles 24, 26
Protection of Cyberspace	Introduction of technical and organizational measures to ensure the security of data and systems	Article 25(1), 26(1)
Emergency Procedures	Coordination of national response mechanisms and emergency procedures	Article 26(1), 27
Incident Reporting Obligation	Implementation of measures to facilitate the reporting of cybersecurity incidents	Article 26(1)
Horizontal Obligations	CERT/CIRTs must cooperate with sectoral bodies and the private sector in incident response	Article 26(2) – (3)
Awareness/Training	Promotion of responsible cybersecurity culture and training	Article 27
International Mutual Assistance	Law enforcement authorities must be able to provide international mutual assistance	Article 32
Protection of Fundamental Rights	The cybersecurity framework must not infringe upon the right to privacy	Article 11 – 13, 25(3)

Figure 1: Key Security Requirements of the AU Malabo Convention. Source: Author's own elaboration.

The analysis of these requirements underscores the intent of Member States to move beyond fragmented national approaches.

By embedding cybersecurity and data protection within a framework of continental cooperation and high-level interoperability, the Convention provides a robust legal foundation for the region. Building upon these commitments, further instruments have been developed to support implementation, specifically addressing resource constraints and the varying levels of cyber maturity across African states.

1.1. Strategic Instruments and Supporting Frameworks

The implementation of the Malabo Convention is further facilitated by the *Internet Infrastructure Security Guidelines for Africa (2017)*. Issued jointly by the African Union Commission (AUC) and the Internet Society (ISOC) as a non-binding instrument, these Guidelines aim to mitigate resource constraints and address the varying levels of cyber maturity across the continent. The document identifies four core pillars of security: awareness, responsibility, cooperation, and respect for fundamental rights. Furthermore, the framework promotes the development of national Computer Emergency Response Teams (CERT/CSIRTs), professional capacity-building, and the establishment of regional information-sharing mechanisms, thereby contributing to the enhancement of African cyber resilience (Internet Society, 2017, pp. 13, 15-17).

These Guidelines exemplify how African Member States translate shared principles into coordinated, practical solutions.

Building upon the commitments of the Malabo Convention, the *Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa 2020–2030 (DTS)* serves as a guiding framework for secure and reliable digital development. The Strategy seeks to advance the digital

economy, foster innovation, and strengthen institutional capacities. It incorporates the recommendations of the EU – AU Digital Economy Task Force (European Commission, 2019), with its cybersecurity component intrinsically linked to the objectives of the Malabo Convention. The cybersecurity requirements outlined in the Strategy include:

- *Establishment* of harmonized cybersecurity policies and regulatory frameworks to support risk management and incident response;
- *Operationalization* of national Computer Emergency Response Teams (CERTs) to facilitate rapid reaction and real-time threat detection;
- *Implementation* of cybersecurity awareness and capacity-building programs;
- *Promotion* of public–private partnerships for threat intelligence sharing and the protection of critical infrastructure;
- *Harmonization* of data protection and security measures with international best practices (African Union Commission, 2020, pp. 33-37).

This Strategy demonstrates the Union’s holistic approach to digital transformation, where cybersecurity is embedded as a prerequisite for modernization. In alignment with the DTS, an administrative arrangement was signed in December 2024 between the European Commission and the Smart Africa Alliance to explicitly support the African Union’s capacity-building initiatives (European Commission, 2024). (The Smart Africa Alliance, created in 2013, is a pan-African initiative that brings together more than 30 Member States to promote digital transformation and wider access to ICT across the continent.)

Following the DTS, the African Union, led by Côte d’Ivoire, developed the *Continental Cybersecurity Blueprint* in 2023. This Blueprint serves as a strategic roadmap for continental cooperation, aiming to advance regulatory harmonization, professional training, and the development of regional CERTs, while ensuring Africa’s active role in shaping global cybersecurity norms. This document provided the foundation for the five-year operational strategy of the *African Network of Cybersecurity Authorities (ANCA)*, adopted in 2025, though the strategy itself is not publicly accessible (TechAfrica News, 2025).

The long-term objectives of the DTS are further advanced by the *African Digital Compact (ADC, 2024)*, which defines the fundamental domains for the continent’s digital future through specific pillars.

The ADC aims to create an inclusive, resilient, and sustainable digital Africa. Its ten developmental pillars include affordable digital access, infrastructure expansion, digital literacy, and the enhancement of cybersecurity and data protection. Notably, the ADC treats the development and ethical adoption of Artificial Intelligence as a distinct pillar. Furthermore, multi-stakeholder cooperation is emphasized, encapsulated by the African proverb: „If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together” (African Union Commission, 2024, pp. 18-36).

Collectively, these pillars solidify the foundations of digital development across African nations; without them, long-term security and global competitiveness remain precarious. Consequently, the African Union has initiated the development of a

Continental Cybersecurity Strategy. In Communiqué No. 1171 (2023), the AU Peace and Security Council outlined measures to accelerate this process, urging Member States to domesticate the Malabo Convention and align it with national legislation (Peace and Security Council, 2023, p. 1).

These strategic efforts are complemented at the operational level by the *ANCA Five-Year Cybersecurity Strategy*, adopted on 4 February 2025. This strategy, though not publicly accessible, establishes a formal framework for collaboration among national cybersecurity authorities to address cross-border threats. Key elements include:

- *Policy and regulatory harmonization* to foster interstate cooperation;
- *Infrastructure strengthening* through the encouragement of national CERTs and information-sharing cultures;
- *Capacity building* via specialized training and education;
- *Public-private partnerships* and multi-stakeholder engagement;
- *Global advocacy* to ensure Africa's influence in international norm-setting (Smart Africa, 2025).

In conclusion, the African Digital Compact and the ANCA strategy illustrate a vital nexus between digital development and operational security. While the ADC establishes the framework for inclusive growth, ANCA provides the operational resilience necessary to counter cross-border threats. This dual approach — integrating development with security — is essential for achieving lasting competitiveness in the global digital landscape.

1.2. Reflections on the Malabo Convention and its Implementation

These reflections not only assess the Malabo Convention itself but also highlight the institutional capacities, political commitments, and technical measures that determine its feasibility and effectiveness across Africa.

A comparative analysis indicates that the Malabo Convention lacks a sufficiently robust framework for mutual assistance and international cooperation, particularly when contrasted with the Council of Europe's Budapest Convention. This limitation risks fragmenting cooperation along sub-regional or bilateral lines and diminishes the Convention's efficacy in addressing cybercrime. To mitigate these deficiencies, the establishment of regional Computer Emergency Response Teams (CERTs) is recommended, supplemented by coordinated measures modelled after European frameworks (Orji, 2018, pp. 91-108).

Furthermore, significant shortcomings are identified in the *ITU Global Cybersecurity Index 2020* report, which underscores persistent challenges such as limited financial resources, a shortage of skilled professionals, and divergences in national regulatory frameworks. These deficiencies contribute to a widening cyber capacity gap between developed and developing nations, undermining the ability of many African states to establish effective CERTs and implement coherent cybersecurity strategies (ITU, 2021, pp. 6-14).

Critical examinations of the Convention's scope also reveal that it does not adequately address emerging threats such as cyberterrorism, hacktivism, cyberespionage, and cyberwarfare. Moreover, historically weak political commitment — evidenced by the fact that only thirteen Member States had ratified the instrument by 2022 — delayed its entry into force for nearly a decade (Akamo, 2022, pp. 6-12).

An analysis of Africa's cybersecurity landscape published in 2022 highlights that the continent's primary challenges are rooted in governance limitations, legal fragmentation, and institutional capacity gaps. A low level of cybersecurity culture and professional education results in persistent vulnerabilities, while many national strategies either remain absent or lack adequate implementation mechanisms. Fragmented legal frameworks and weak enforcement further hinder effective responses to cybercrime, a problem compounded by limited intelligence-sharing channels. Additionally, insufficient leadership commitment and low participation in global cyber-diplomacy reduce the continent's ability to assert its interests in international norm-setting processes. Finally, non-transparent procurement practices and limited technological self-reliance sustain long-term external dependencies (KPMG Advisory Services, 2022, pp. 24-25).

Similarly, comprehensive scholarly research attributes the vulnerability of Africa's cybersecurity environment to institutional and infrastructural deficiencies that increase exposure to modern cyberattacks. Fragmented responsibilities and limited private-sector involvement weaken incident response; moreover, the obsolescence of critical systems increases risk, as new technologies are often introduced without adequate security controls. The lack of legal harmonization and the insufficiency of human resource and education systems further undermine the sustainable cyber resilience (Dér, 2025, pp. 37-39,40-45).

The Malabo Roadmap offers further critical remarks, noting that the Convention has suffered from political inertia. It is characterized as being simultaneously over-inclusive and under-inclusive: while bundling together diverse policy areas, it lacks the granular detail and enforcement mechanisms necessary for practical implementation. Some critics also argue that it reflects excessive European influence, approximating EU data protection regimes without sufficient adaptation to specific African contexts (ALT Advisory, 2022, pp. 9-10).

Structural deficiencies continue to hinder effective implementation. The diversity of legal systems complicates harmonization, while the limited capacity of data protection authorities weakens oversight. Additionally, the persistent digital divide, particularly in rural areas, restricts infrastructure access and obstructs the deployment of cybersecurity measures (Bouke M A, 2023, pp. 7-9).

Regionally focused examination observes that African cyber governance remains constrained by political fragmentation and institutional gaps. The delayed ratification of the Malabo Convention, combined with contradictory national legislation, undermines the establishment of a unified framework. Sovereignty concerns and limited engagement in global governance further prevent states from building the trust necessary for effective implementation (Ifeanyi-Ajufo, 2023, pp. 152-154).

Finally, the extended ratification process (2014 – 2023) has compromised the Convention's credibility as a continental framework. Many AU Member States have already adopted more robust national or regional data protection regimes, reducing the perceived necessity of the Convention. Furthermore, its provisions are increasingly viewed as outdated, failing to address contemporary challenges such as artificial intelligence, cross-border data flows, and cloud computing (African Researchers Magazine, 2025).

1.3. Synthesizing the Strategic Landscape

Following the adoption of the Malabo Convention, the subsequent decades witnessed an acceleration of AU level strategies and development programs. It is evident that the strategic considerations presented, the requirements embedded in the Convention, and the following initiatives collectively lay the foundations for a comprehensive African cybersecurity framework.

By way of analogy, the EU Directive on Security of Network and Information Systems (NIS2) encompasses similar fundamental content requirements; however, the terminology used is not exactly the same. Figure 2, with its two columns, illustratively shows the similarity.

AU – Malabo Convention, Chapter III. (African Union, 2014)	EU – NIS2 Directive (European Union, 2022).
National Strategy (Article 24)	National Cybersecurity Strategy (Article 7)
National Regulatory Authorities (Article 25)	Competent Authorities (Article 8)
National Organizations (e. g. CERT/CIRT) (Article 27, 28)	Computer Security Incident Response Teams (CSIRT) (Article 10)
Resilience (Article 24, 26)	Resilience (Article 7 and 5, 28, 55, 85, 91. p.)
Emergency (Governance, Institutional Framework) (Article 26)	Crisis management system (Article 9)
Education and Training (Article 27)	Training (Article 20, 21)
International Mutual Assistance (Article 32)	Mutual Assistance (Article 37)

Figure 2: Key Elements of the Malabo Convention and the NIS2 Directive. Source: Author's own elaboration.

The alignment of African strategic elements with these internationally recognized requirements confirms the validity of the Convention's objectives.

It is argued that the development and functioning of national cybersecurity frameworks are not merely technical matters. Beyond digitalization and security, their practical effectiveness is shaped by political, legal, and economic decisions, cultural contexts, and resource availability. It may be inferred that the prolonged ratification process, following the initial consensus, was hindered by the emergence of competing

national interests. This underscores the importance of AU level management and the necessity of coordinating diverse national considerations within such a complex regulatory environment.

In light of the aforementioned criticisms, it must be emphasized that international instruments like the Malabo Convention should remain framework-oriented. Essential details must be developed by individual nations during implementation, ensuring that regulations are aligned with national strategic requirements and sovereign internal policies. Regarding the absence of AI and other emerging elements, it should be noted that the Convention already supports the development of three major pillars; further broadening its scope at this stage might diminish its overall effectiveness.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of the adoption process remains critical. Regulatory requirements developed in distinct environments can only be successfully integrated if supporting and oversight mechanisms are available and operational. Practical experience suggests that the elements highlighted in critical reviews — such as regional CERTs and coordinated cyber crisis response — constitute essential operational responsibilities. In addition to regional CERTs, incident management can be bolstered by functional CERTs (e.g., in the energy, finance, healthcare, transportation, and defence sectors), where sector-specific technical requirements can be precisely identified.

The following chapter provides an objective overview of national responses to these requirements. This presentation aims to offer a realistic overview of the cybersecurity landscape across various African countries without engaging in comparative or critical analysis at this stage.

2. Characteristics of National Cybersecurity Frameworks

The overview of the cybersecurity posture across African countries is presented with a broad analytical focus, drawing on components grounded in practical implementation experience. The examined elements include national cybersecurity strategies (or equivalent instruments), cybersecurity legislation, designated supervisory authorities, and operational cybersecurity organizations (CERT/CIRT).

Given the inherent interrelation between cybersecurity and data protection, the existence of data protection legislation and a corresponding oversight authority is also treated as a primary indicator.

In addition to the country names, the comparative analysis reports the global cybersecurity ranking according to the *ITU Global Cybersecurity Index 2024* (International Telecommunication Union, 2024), where Tier 1 (T1) denotes the highest level of maturity. The table also indicates the Malabo Convention ratification status — distinguishing between signatories (s) and those that have fully ratified (r) the instrument (African Union, 2014).

Data for Table 2 were compiled from several specialized sources, including the *FIRST Global CSIRT Directory* (Forum of Incident Response and Security Teams, n.d.) the *UNCTAD Data Protection Legislation Database*, the *ITU National Cybersecurity Strategies Repository*, and *World Bank Digital Governance Profiles* (United Nations

Conference on Trade and Development, n.d.). These were supplemented by an extensive review of national official gazettes and government portals. All entries have been verified as of 01 December 2025.

To ensure consistency in the comparative analysis, Table 3 includes only those countries that meet at least four of the six examined criteria. When examining the presence or absence of the strategy, two legislative acts, and three national organizations, specifying the minimum threshold is critically important. For example, in the absence of a strategy, the lack of a dedicated organizational capability does not yet endanger cybersecurity operability, but further deficiencies can already be critical (including the fact that national organizations cannot operate without legislative foundation). This approach may seem overly critical, but a systemic examination of the operational and cybersecurity framework of information systems can justify the legitimacy of the presented limitation.

To respect country-specific legal traditions, French-language regulatory terms and authority names are preserved in their original form.

Country (GCI tier) Malabo Convention signed or ratified	National Cybersecurity Strategy (or equivalent)	Cybersecurity Act (or equivalent)	Cybersecurity Supervisory Authority (or equivalent)	CERT (or equivalent)	Data Protection Legislation (or equivalent)	Data Protection Authority (or equivalent)
Mauritius (T1)	National Cybersecurity Strategy (2023–2026)	Cybersecurity and Cybercrime Act (2021) (No. 16 of 2021)	Ministry of Information Technology, Communication and Innovation (MITCI)	Computer Emergency Response Team of Mauritius (CERT-MU)	Data Protection Act (2017) (No. 20 of 2017)	Data Protection Office
Ghana (T1)	National Cybersecurity Policy and Strategy (2024)	Cybersecurity Act 2020 (Act 1038)	Cyber Security Authority (CSA)	Ghana Computer Emergency Response Team (GhCERT)	Data Protection Act 2012 (Act 843)	Data Protection Commission (DPC)
Rwanda (T1)	National Cybersecurity Strategy (2024–2029)	Partly: Cyber Crimes Law (No. 60/2018) IT Products Security Proclamation (No. 1310/2023)	National Cyber Security Authority (NCSA)	National Computer Security Incident Response Team (Rw-CSIRT)	Protection of Personal Data and Privacy Law (No. 058/2021)	Data Protection and Privacy Office (DPO)
Egypt (T1)	National Cybersecurity Strategy 2023–2027	Partly: Law No. 175 of 2018 on Combating Information Technology Crimes	Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT)	Egyptian Computer Emergency Readiness Team (EG-CERT)	Personal Data Protection Law (Law No. 151 of 2020)	Personal Data Protection Center (PDPC)
Morocco (T1)	National Cybersecurity Strategy 2030	Loi No. 05-20 relative à la	Direction Générale de la Sécurité des	Moroccan Computer Emergency	Law No. 09-08 (2009) on	Commission Nationale de Contrôle de la

Country (GCI tier) Malabo Convention signed or ratified	National Cybersecurity Strategy (or equivalent)	Cybersecurity Act (or equivalent)	Cybersecurity Supervisory Authority (or equivalent)	CERT (or equivalent)	Data Protection Legislation (or equivalent)	Data Protection Authority (or equivalent)
		Cybersécurité (2020)	Systèmes d'Information (DGSSI)	Response Team (maCERT)	Personal Data Protection	Protection des Données à Caractère Personnel (CNDP)
South Africa (T2)	National Cybersecurity Policy Framework (NCPF, 2015)	Partly: Cybercrimes Act, 2020 (Act No. 19 of 2020) Electronic Communications and Transactions Act, 2002 (Act No. 25 of 2002)	State Security Agency (SSA)	South Africa National Computer Security Incident Response Team (ZA-CERT)	Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA, Act 4 of 2013)	Information Regulator (South Africa)
Nigeria (T3)	National Cybersecurity Policy and Strategy (NCPs, 2021)	Partly: Cybercrimes Act, 2015 (Act No. 24), amended 2024	Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA)	Nigeria Computer Emergency Response Team (ngCERT)	Data Protection Act, 2023 (No. 4 of 2023)	Data Protection Commission (NDPC)
Senegal (T3)	Stratégie Nationale de Cybersécurité du Sénégal (SNC2022)	Partly: Law No. 2008-11 of 25 January 2008 on Cybercrime	Direction Générale du Chiffre et de la Sécurité des Systèmes d'Information (DCSSI)	Senegal National Computer Security Incident Response Team	Law No. 2008-12 of 25 January 2008 on the Protection of Personal Data	Commission de Protection des Données Personnelles (CDP)
Zambia (T2)	National Cybersecurity Policy (2021)	Cyber Security Act 2025 (Act No. 3 of 2025)	Zambia Cyber Security Agency	Zambia Cyber Incident Response Team (ZCIRT)	Data Protection Act, 2021 (Act No. 3 of 2021)	Data Protection Commission (DPC)
Togo (T2)	National Cybersecurity Strategy 2024–2028	Law No. 2018-026 on Cybersecurity and the Fight Against Cybercrime (2018)	Agence Nationale de la Cybersécurité (ANCy)	National CERT / Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-TG)	Loi n°2019-014 relative à la protection des données à caractère personnel	Instance de Protection des Données à Caractère Personnel (IPDCP)
Kenya (T1)	National Cybersecurity Strategy 2022 – 2027	Partly: Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act, 2018 (No. 5 of 2018) Critical Information Infrastructure and Cybercrime Management Regulations, 44 of 2024	National Computer and Cybercrimes Coordination Committee (NC4)	Kenya National Computer Incident Response Team – Coordination Centre (KE-CIRT/CC)	Data Protection Act No. 24 of 2019	Office of the Data Protection Commissioner (ODPC)
Uganda (T3)	Ugandan National Cybersecurity Strategy 2022–2026	Partly: The Computer Misuse (Amendment) Act, 2022	National Information Technology Authority –	Uganda National Computer Emergency Response	Data Protection and Privacy Act, 2019	Personal Data Protection Office (PDPO)

Country (GCI tier) Malabo Convention signed or ratified	National Cybersecurity Strategy (or equivalent)	Cybersecurity Act (or equivalent)	Cybersecurity Supervisory Authority (or equivalent)	CERT (or equivalent)	Data Protection Legislation (or equivalent)	Data Protection Authority (or equivalent)
		Electronic Transactions Act, 2011 (No. 8 of 2011)	Uganda (NITA-U)	Team / Coordination Centre (CERT.UG/CC)	(No. 9 of 2019)	
Tunisia (T3)	Stratégie nationale en matière de cybersécurité 2020–2025	Décret-loi n° 2023-17 du 11 mars 2023, relatif à la cybersécurité	Agence Nationale de la Cybersécurité (ANCS)	Tunisian Computer Emergency Response Team (tunCERT)	Law No. 2004-63 of 27 July 2004 on the Protection of Personal Data	Instance Nationale de Protection des Données Personnelles (INPDP)
Botswana (T3)	National Cybersecurity Strategy (2016–2022)	Partly: Electronic Communications and Transactions Act (2014) (No. 14 of 2014)	Botswana Communications Regulatory Authority (BOCRA)	Botswana National CSIRT (BW-CSIRT)	Data Protection (2024) (Act 18)	BOCRA – designated function
Ethiopia (T3)	National Cybersecurity Policy and Strategy (2020)	Partly: IT Products Security Clearance and Control Proclamation No. 1310/2023. Computer Crime Proclamation No. 958/2016.	Information Network Security Administration (INSA)	Ethiopian Cyber Emergency Readiness and Response Team (Ethio-CERT)	Personal Data Protection Proclamation (2024) (No. 1321/2024).	INSA – designated function
Tanzania (T1)	Government Cyber Security Strategy (2022–2027)	Partly: Cybercrimes Act, 2015 (No. 14 of 2015)	Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA)	Tanzania Computer Emergency Response Team (TZ-CERT)	Personal Data Protection Act, 2022 (No. 11 of 2022)	Data Protection Commission
Algeria (T3)	National Cybersecurity Strategy: For a Cyber-Resilient Algeria (2023)	Partly: General rules relating to post and electronic communications (Law No. 18-04 of 13 May 2018) Specific rules on the prevention and fight against ICT crimes (Law No. 09-04 of 5 August 2009)	Agence Nationale de la Sécurité des Systèmes d'Information (ASSI)	Algeria National Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-DZ)	Law No. 18-07 on the Protection of Individuals in the Processing of Personal Data (2018)	Autorité Nationale de Protection des Données Personnelles (ANPDP)
Mozambique (T3)	National Cybersecurity Policy and its Implementation Strategy (approved by Resolution No. 69/2021)	Partly: Penal Code (Law No. 24/2019) és Electronic Transactions Law (No. 3/2017)	Instituto Nacional de Tecnologias de Informação e Comunicação (INTIC)	Mozambique's National Cybersecurity Incident Response Team (nCSIRT.MZ / CSIRT.MZ)	Partly. Constitution of Mozambique (2004) Electronic Transactions Law (No. 3/2017)	INTIC – designated function
Malawi (T3)	Malawi National Cybersecurity	Electronic Transactions and Cyber Security	Malawi Communications Regulatory	Malawi Computer Emergency	Data Protection Act, 2024	Data Protection Authority

Country (GCI tier) Malabo Convention signed or ratified	National Cybersecurity Strategy (or equivalent)	Cybersecurity Act (or equivalent)	Cybersecurity Supervisory Authority (or equivalent)	CERT (or equivalent)	Data Protection Legislation (or equivalent)	Data Protection Authority (or equivalent)
	Strategy (NCS) 2019 – 2024	Act, 2016 (Act No. 33 of 2016)	Authority (MACRA)	Response Team (mwCERT)	(No. 3 of 2024)	(MACRA – designated function)
Cameroon (T3)	no officially adopted national cybersecurity strategy	Law No. 2010/012 of 21 December 2010 relating to cybersecurity and cybercriminality in Cameroon	Agence Nationale des Technologies de l'Information et de la Communication (ANTIC)	Cameroon Computer Incident Response Team (CIRT/ANTIC)	Law No. 2024/017 of 23 December 2024 relating to personal data protection	Personal Data Protection Authority (DPA) ANTIC – designated function

Figure 3: Country cybersecurity parameters. Data manually collected; sources current as of 01 December 2025.

It must be noted that the presence of these six parameters does not, in itself, guarantee the effective functioning of cybersecurity and data protection within a given country. This high-level overview, focusing on essential indicators, provides a structural baseline rather than an exhaustive in-depth analysis.

An examination of Figure 2 reveals that twenty countries have already established a significant portion of the legal, strategic, regulatory, and operational structures identified as targets by this study. These nations have developed frameworks that are likely to support the long-term maintenance of cybersecurity through the integration of additional specialized tools.

The geographical distribution of these countries — spanning Northern, Western, Eastern, and Southern Africa — indicates that cybersecurity development is occurring across multiple regional hubs rather than being confined to a single area. This diversity enhances Africa's potential for continental integration, as these leading nations are well-positioned to drive regional and international cooperation. Furthermore, compliance is not limited to the continent's largest economies; smaller states demonstrate that strong political will and institutional organization are sufficient to build a comprehensive framework.

The results presented in Figure 2 suggest that the strategic cybersecurity requirements set by the African Union are not unrealistic, as the necessary tasks are demonstrably achievable. Nearly half of the fifty-five AU Member States have established several of the examined cybersecurity elements, suggesting a positive trend for future national-level development. In many instances, the evolution of a cybersecurity ecosystem begins with criminal law and electronic commerce regulations. A common preparatory step for establishing an independent regulator involves assigning specific functions to an existing state organization (designated authority), while the establishment of incident-handling organizations (CERT/CSIRT) remains a cornerstone of early-stage development.

A notable nuance emerges among the best-prepared countries (Tier 1 classification): Egypt, Morocco, Kenya, and Tunisia have signed the Malabo Convention but have not yet ratified it. This underscores a dual dimension in African cybersecurity: advanced

national preparedness on one hand, and a more cautious approach to continental integration on the other. Interestingly, Botswana stands out as the only country among the top twenty that, despite its advanced ecosystem, remains outside the Malabo community. Interpreting the political or other broader dimensions based on the introduction is beyond the scope of this analysis; therefore, only a brief indication can be provided. The data in Table 3, and the conclusions directly observable from it, demonstrate that cybersecurity decisions in African countries are not driven solely by cyber-threat considerations. General social development and global trends may exert a positive influence on cybersecurity culture and continental cooperation. In this area, natural development would be preferable, rather than progress forced by a major, cross-border cyber incident.

A deeper analysis of the issuance dates and specific mandates of these regulations could provide further insights in subsequent research.

Beyond the institutional landscape, recent data highlight evolving trends in Africa's digital resilience and threat environment. Internet resilience improved between 2022 and 2023, particularly in West, Central, and East Africa, reflecting the expansion of Internet Exchange Points (IXPs) and stronger inter-provider cooperation (Internet Society, 2025).

This progress is reflected in regulatory developments; according to the *ITU Global Cybersecurity Index*, the continent's average score increased by 171% between 2017 and 2024 (Intelpoint, 2024).

The *INTERPOL 2025* report highlights positive global developments, such as enhanced national cybercrime frameworks aligned with the Budapest Convention and expanded digital forensics infrastructure. Increased cyber resilience is also observed through coordinated multi-agency actions and reinforced law enforcement operations, including cross-border intelligence-sharing (INTERPOL, 2025, pp. 26-29).

However, challenges remain significant. Scholarly analysis of cybercrime-related threats underline that the growing interplay between online fraud, financial abuse, and dark-web services reflects the emergence of an increasingly organized criminal ecosystem, shaped by persistent structural vulnerabilities (Gulyás, 2025, pp. 11-117, 120-122).

Furthermore, critical constraints to digital transformation include infrastructure gaps, low uptake of digital services, and affordability issues. These are compounded by a lack of digital identification systems and fragmented regulatory environments, which limit the scalability of digital services (World Bank, 2024a).

Finally, the strengthening of CSIRTs remains fundamental to the national cybersecurity ecosystem. Development remains uneven, with some countries maintaining multiple operational teams while others face significant capacity gaps. Addressing these requires targeted investments, enhanced regional cooperation, and sustainable financing models, such as public-private partnerships and the integration of open-source tools (World Bank, 2024b, pp. 5–6, 16–19).

3. Capacity Building Initiatives

As previously discussed, initiatives aimed at defining cybersecurity requirements are already gaining momentum across African nations. This development is essential, as mitigating threats to digital infrastructure cannot be achieved without robust national-level organizational and procedural capabilities. Establishing and maintaining resilient regional and national cybersecurity environments depends not only on legal harmonization but also on targeted capacity development and practical cooperation.

Current threat landscapes illustrate the risks of shortcomings in existing cybersecurity frameworks. According to INTERPOL's 2024 report, cybercrime reached unprecedented levels in Africa in 2023, while the global average number of weekly cyberattacks grew by 23%. The financial impact of cybercrime in Africa was estimated at 10% of GDP in 2021, a figure that has likely increased since. Citing Check Point's 2023 data, the report highlights that African organizations faced ransomware attempts at a weekly rate of 1:15 in 2023, significantly exceeding the global average of 1:31. These campaigns increasingly target critical infrastructure, with the average loss per attack rising to USD 5.13 million in 2023 — a 13% year-on-year increase (INTERPOL, 2024, pp. 10-11, 13).

According to INTERPOL's African Cyberthreat Assessment Report 2025, the most prevalent cybercrimes in 2024 included online scams, ransomware, business email compromise (BEC), and digital sextortion (INTERPOL, 2025, pp. 12 -19). The financial sector remains a primary target for organized criminal groups and financially motivated actors, who increasingly employ "heist-style" operations for high-value thefts, alongside elevated levels of espionage and data exfiltration (Dartnall, 2022, p. 1).

The global evolution of attack vectors further complicates the landscape. Analysis by Palo Alto Networks' Unit 42 indicates a significant increase in the speed of data exfiltration; in a quarter of examined incidents, data was exfiltrated in less than five hours after initial compromise — three times faster than in 2021 (Palo Alto, 2025).

The *ENISA 2025 Threat Landscape* confirms a similar pattern: ransomware, ransomware-as-a-service (RaaS), phishing, and rapid exfiltration are core threats across all regions, indicating that these are global rather than region-specific phenomena. This underscores a shared operational challenge: the shrinking window between compromise and theft makes detection and mitigation increasingly difficult. Consequently, both African and European strategic perspectives point to the same priorities: accelerated detection, strengthened identity and access controls, prioritized patching, and modernized incident-response procedures (ENISA, 2025, pp. 5-10, 16).

Scholarly analysis of cybercrime-related threats underlines that the growing interplay between online fraud, financial abuse, and dark-web services reflects the emergence of an increasingly organized criminal ecosystem, shaped by persistent structural vulnerabilities (Gulyás, 2025, pp. 11-117, 120-122).

The rapid spread of mobile devices and internet services across several African regions has not been accompanied by equally strong and reliable security services or protective mechanisms. This imbalance is reflected in the Central Sahel, where cyber-threat

exposure is amplified by limited defensive capacities and structural vulnerabilities (Vörös Gy, Szulcsányi V, 2025).

To transition from risk to readiness, the following sections examine the key initiatives and institutions providing policy direction, technical support, and incident-response capacity to bolster national cybersecurity frameworks.

3.1. Emerging Frameworks for Capacity Building

The **Accra Call for Cyber Resilient Development** supports the practical implementation of the Malabo Convention's legal framework while strengthening capacity-building mechanisms. Launched at the 2023 Global Conference on Cyber Capacity Building (GC3B), this initiative aims to catalyse global action, positioning cybersecurity as a core element of sustainable development. This voluntary, non-binding framework is built around four strategic pillars: integrating cyber resilience into development strategies, promoting demand-driven capacity building, enhancing coordination among partners, and mobilizing sustainable financing for national programmes (GC3B, 2023).

Analysis demonstrates that the Accra Call effectively bridges the gap between the legal obligations of the Malabo Convention and on-the-ground implementation. It serves as a convening platform for member states, the private sector, financial institutions, and academia, translating high-level policy into technical practice.

This action framework is further complemented by expert coordination mechanisms. The *Global Forum on Cyber Expertise (GFCE) Africa Hub* acts as a central connector, enhancing Africa's influence in international policy fora while linking national priorities to implementation partners. The Hub supports the *Africa Agenda on Cyber Capacity Building (AA-CCB)* and the Cyber Capacity Building Coordination Committee, while hosting communities such as the *Africa Cyber Experts (ACE)*. These structures enable tailored knowledge exchange and multi-stakeholder coordination across governments and civil society (GC3B, 2025, pp. 3, 7, 10, 14-16).

The **Lomé Declaration on Cybersecurity and Cybercrime in Africa** provides a critical political complement to these efforts. By mobilizing high-level commitment, it reinforces national legal frameworks and promotes public-private partnerships, alongside strengthened CERT and Security Operations Centre (SOC) functions. The Declaration fosters regional coordination that operationalizes the practice-oriented delivery model endorsed by the Accra Call (Kamau, 2022).

Finally, the **Africa Agenda on Cyber Capacity Building (AA-CCB)** serves as the overarching continental action framework. Operated by AU level coordination structures, the Agenda focuses on the sustainable strengthening of the continent's cyber capabilities. Beyond supporting the update of national strategies, it enhances the operational readiness of CERT/CSIRT and SOC teams through inclusive skills programmes. Furthermore, the AA-CCB advances the harmonization of regulatory frameworks to improve interoperability and legal certainty, while coordinating resource mobilization for the protection of critical information infrastructure (GFCE, 2023, pp. 2, 8, 10-13).

3.2. Institutional Actors and Capabilities

The Accra Call, the Lomé Declaration, and the Africa Agenda establish an unified strategic direction by setting legal and capacity-building priorities. These frameworks emphasize the urgent need for regulatory harmonization, specialized training, and institutional strengthening. However, the critical challenge lies in translating these high-level mandates into measurable actions and identifying the entities responsible for coordinating their continental implementation.

The **African Union Commission (AUC)**, as the AU's executive body, plays a central role in shaping continental approaches to cybersecurity and digital governance. Its mandate involves advancing Africa's engagement in global cyber-norm processes, supporting negotiations on international cybercrime instruments, and promoting the Malabo Convention as the primary framework for regional security (African Union, 2024).

Furthermore, the AUC works to align national policies with emerging global standards, supports the development of national CERT/CIRTs through the AfricaCERT network, and channels technical assistance for capacity-building efforts (DiploFoundation, 2022).

The **Smart Africa Alliance (SAA)**, a heads-of-state endorsed initiative, accelerates ICT-driven development and digital transformation under the principles of the Smart Africa Manifesto (Smart Africa, n.d. a.).

Guided by its Secretariat, the SAA convenes expert working groups to develop „Blueprints” and „Handbooks” on critical areas such as Digital ID, e-payments, and AI. These technical mechanisms directly support cybersecurity objectives by informing national strategies, harmonizing CERT and SOC capabilities, and monitoring implementation to ensure operational readiness (Smart Africa, n.d. b.).

A significant milestone occurred in December 2024, when the EU and Smart Africa signed Global Gateway agreements to expand secure digital networks and reinforce African-owned data governance (European Commission, 2024).

The **African Centre for Coordination and Research in Cybersecurity (ACCRC)**, based in Lomé, was established in 2022 through a partnership between Togo and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). As a direct outcome of the Lomé Declaration, the Centre functions as an Africa-wide cybersecurity intelligence hub. Its objectives include supporting the establishment of national cybersecurity agencies, collaborating with law enforcement, and providing specialized technical research to assist Member States in implementing the Malabo Convention (United Nations, 2022).

Operational coordination is further bolstered by **AfricaCERT**, a regional non-profit platform established in 2012 to support the development and coordination of national CSIRTs across Africa (AfricaCERT, n.d.). AfricaCERT provides national CSIRTs with access to advanced Cyber Threat Intelligence (CTI) platforms and trusted information-sharing mechanisms, facilitating real-time threat monitoring and the early detection of malicious campaigns (Resecurity, 2025).

Finally, the **African Network of Cybersecurity Authorities (ANCA)** serves as a continent-level coordination platform. ANCA's initiatives include the planned establishment of a regional "ANCA CERT," the scaling of the Cybersecurity Innovation Centre (CIC) pilot, and the coordination of regional cyber exercises. Notably, the organization is developing a continent-wide Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) framework to track progress across member states, a tool intended to clearly distinguish high-level political commitment from tangible on-the-ground results (Smart Africa, 2025).

The following section provides a tabular summary of the key attributes and influence areas of these pivotal organizations.

Institution	Mandate	Primary functions	Geographic scope
African Union Commission (AUC)	Continental executive body responsible for policy coordination, norm promotion and Malabo Convention facilitation	Global norm engagement; Malabo implementation support; regional coordination	Continental
Smart Africa Alliance (SAA)	Accelerate ICT-driven development and enable interoperable national digital strategies	Develop Blueprints/Handbooks; harmonize standards; coordinate partner engagement	Member-state network; continental impact
African Centre for Coordination and Research in Cybersecurity (ACCRC)	Continental wide cybersecurity information and intelligence hub supporting national capacity and strategic research	National capacity building; incident-response support; research & technical assistance	Continental (Lomé)
AfricaCERT	Continental wide platform to support national CSIRTs and facilitate CTI sharing across Africa	Provide CTI platforms; enable trusted information sharing; proactive threat monitoring	Continental
African Network of Cybersecurity Authorities (ANCA)	Continental coordination and regulatory harmonization platform for national cybersecurity authorities	Establish regional ANCA CERT; scale CIC; coordinate exercises and M&E frameworks	Continental (ANCA CERT: regional)

Figure 4: Institutional actors and primary functions.

The overview provided in Figure 4 serves as a functional baseline for understanding the institutional architecture of African cybersecurity. However, it must be emphasized that within such a complex ecosystem, the precise delineation of mandates and responsibilities is of paramount importance.

The presented organizational framework is logically structured, yet it also entails potential coordination risks. For example, continent-wide coordination tasks should be clearly distinguished between the AUC and ANCA. In the case of AfricaCERT and ANCA CERT, continental and regional roles must operate in close alignment, and any form of organizational competition should be consciously avoided.

Prior to the introduction of new mandates or functions, a rigorous analysis should determine which entity is best positioned to assume additional tasks without jeopardizing its core responsibilities or duplicating existing efforts.

Summary and Conclusions

A review of the essential elements presented in this study reveals that Africa's cybersecurity landscape is characterized by complexity rather than simplicity.

The Malabo Convention, adopted over a decade ago as a foundational step, has been followed since 2019 by increasingly targeted national support programmes. The Convention's requirements serve as robust pillars for regional security and remain realistic strategic objectives. However, critical assessments indicate that the development of national capabilities built upon this foundation is proceeding slowly, with effectiveness often hampered by structural constraints.

Some critics demand progress „on all fronts” under the Convention, citing a lack of detailed implementation rules. Based on practical experience, such an expectation is often unrealistic, even in environments where financial and human resources are available. Establishing and sustaining a professional cybersecurity culture requires complex procedural measures, sustained government leadership, and a coherent top-down logic. Chapter two of this study illustrates this reality, providing a pragmatic portrayal of the current maturity levels of national regulatory and organizational frameworks.

From a prospective outlook, an AU level Cybersecurity Strategy — if accompanied by sound political governance, heightened leadership awareness, and targeted support for national authorities — could serve as a transformative development instrument. Success will depend largely on long-term, coordinated support from the AU level bodies described in Chapter Three. With such institutional backing, national authorities can effectively leverage programme resources to build comprehensive cyber-defence frameworks, encompassing legislation, regulatory functions, awareness programmes, and the necessary technical and scientific backbone.

The evidence presented in the study clearly supports the conclusion drawn from the hypothesis that the cybersecurity frameworks of African countries should be strengthened through balanced, strategic-level procedural and organizational measures. As shown in Figure 3, beyond the existence of a national framework, the development of cyber culture is essential for enabling effective cooperation. This can be supported by the continent-level — and not only technical — activities of the actors listed in Figure 4, by the incorporation of feedback, and by the successful mitigation of coordination risks.

AU level programmes and the operation of central organizations must be reinforced by national governmental and political frameworks and decisions.

While a precise forecast for the cybersecurity situation across African countries remains elusive, two actors among the instruments discussed bear a particularly critical responsibility: the **African Union Commission (AUC)**, which must act as a flagship by signalling strategic directions; and the **African Network of Cybersecurity Authorities (ANCA)**, which must provide objective feedback on implementation through its developing Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) framework.

Providing timely and accurate feedback to decision-makers regarding the status and necessary conditions for implementation would mark a significant milestone in the evolution of the African Union's cybersecurity ecosystem.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that he has no competing interest.

Notes on Contributor

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Afro-Pessimism: The Limits of a Concept¹

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Abstract:

Afro-pessimism can be defined as a negative or “pessimistic” perspective on the future of Africa, rooted in the continent's history and current situation. The concept, used since the late 1980s, argues that Africa's challenges are unsolvable and that its future will resemble its past. Within this framework, the study will address the concept of Afro-pessimism with a holistic approach and seek to answer the questions, “What are the issues with the concept of Afro-pessimism? What criticisms can be made of this concept?”. This study first examines the emergence and content of the concept, and then demonstrates how it is used, particularly in the media and related studies. In conclusion, the study argues that there are two fundamental issues related to Afro-pessimism. Firstly, negative news about Africa in the media reinforces a pessimistic view of the continent; secondly, there is a tendency to generalize negative events in specific countries to “Africa” as a whole.

Keywords:

Africa; Afro-Pessimism; Media; Hopeless Continent; Dark Continent.

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Introduction

“At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit.” (Hegel, 1899, p. 99).

Parents often criticize children who refuse to eat by saying, “Children in Africa don't have access to this food.” This phrase, repeated for decades, can be given as an example from everyday life that shows how Africa is perceived and how attitudes toward the continent have not changed. Bora (2003, p. 144) provides a similar example, noting that people react to anti-democratic or “uncivilized” practices by claiming, “Such a thing could not even be seen in Uganda”. As Evans (2011, p. 399) states: “The news out of Africa is bad [...] because bad things are happening there”. Mazrui wrote at the beginning of his 1986 book, “Things are not going well in Africa.” (1992, p. 13). Does this statement from 40 years ago still hold true?

Afro-pessimism can be seen clearly when one considers the real problems present in much of the continent, the increasing prevalence of negative news about the continent in the media, and the prejudices against its people (Gordon and Wolpe, 1998, p. 54). The designation of Africa as the “Dark Continent” was achieved by ignoring all historical knowledge and relations with Africa. Re-invented in the 19th century, the idea of “Black Africa” gained widespread popularity, particularly in the Tarzan novels written by the American author Edgar Rice Burroughs in 1912. The author, who knew the continent from books titled “Dark Continent” (Stanley, 1890) and never actually visited to Africa, described it as a wild, primitive, and isolated place (Bassil, 2011, pp. 379, 394).

There are two possible approaches to researching Afro-pessimism. The first is to demonstrate Africa's progress in economics, education, security, sports, and similar areas through data, thereby showing the continent's development and offering optimistic predictions about its future. Thus, it is possible to demonstrate that Afro-pessimism is incorrect. The second approach involves conducting a study that justifies pessimistic interpretations of the continent's future by providing statistical evidence of the dire situation in Africa, including coups, democratic instability, poverty and food shortages. Thus, it is possible to justify the concept of Afro-pessimism.

This study isn't about the Black struggle in the United States or racism against Black people in the United States. Similar issues in Europe are also outside the scope of this study. Instead, this study focuses solely to analyze the pessimistic perspective towards the African continent. It aims to examine the concept from a holistic perspective by focusing on the construction of Afro-pessimism. Studies on Afro-pessimism have generally focused on negative (pessimistic) news about Africa published in the media of various countries. It appears that there are no studies that specifically address the concept of Afro-pessimism. Therefore, this study focuses on the content of the concept of Afro-pessimism and seeks to answer the following questions, “What are the issues

with the concept of Afro-pessimism? What criticisms can be made of this concept?”. It will first examine the origins and content of the concept of Afro-pessimism, and the following section will discuss various studies related to the topic.

The Birth of the Concept and its Content

The term Afro-pessimism was first used in 1987 by the French Minister of Cooperation, Michel Aurillac, in an article published in *Le Monde* regarding economic development and political democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa (Wacquant, 2023). Nothias (2015, p. 42), however, explains the first use of the concept in a different way. It was first used in an article by Aurillac titled “France: creditors should do more for Africa’s debt problem” published by China’s Xinhua News Agency on March 27, 1988. Following these journalistic origins, Hawkins (1990, p. 205) used the concept for the first time in an academic study as “So widespread and deeply rooted is Afro-pessimism [...]” (Nothias, 2015, p. 42).

Following the era of decolonization, the initial sympathy toward newly independent African states shifted. The optimism of the 1960s was replaced by a new discourse: Afro-pessimism. Although the phenomenon of Afro-pessimism seems to have been ongoing for decades, its discursive origins can actually be traced back at least to 15th-century Western consciousness. The perspective of Europeans who first arrived on the continent shares some similarities with the perspective seen today: Africa cannot succeed on its own (de B’béri & Louw, 2011, p. 337-338).

Africa, which lost its people to slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is still referred to as a “continent” dependent on the support of donors and aid organizations in the twenty-first century. Afro-pessimism is reinforced by the fact that Africa is constantly associated with famine, war, coups, debt, poverty, and AIDS (Momoh, 2003, p. 33). It is generally defined as pessimistic attitude toward the continent’s ability to cope with its many problems such as poverty, governance and health. (Béni, 2021, p. 190). According to Schorr (2011, p. 23), Afro-pessimism is “briefly, the perception that ‘Africa’ has always been and will continue to be a scary, backward and poverty-ridden place”. Similarly, Leys (1996) addresses the numerous challenges facing Africa and argues that the continent’s future remains bleak due to these persistent issues:

“[...] Africa is not in fact balanced on a knife’s edge between recovery or collapse: it is a tragedy that is already far advanced. Millions of people have already died from hunger, disease and violence, and millions more face Hobbesian existences in conditions of accelerating environmental and social degradation: famines, chronic malnutrition, the collapse of health services, the erosion of education, reappearing endemic and epidemic diseases, AIDS, endemic criminal violence, civil wars, genocide [...] very few people believe that things in Africa are going to get better [...]” (p. 188).

If Africa were truly as hopeless as it is portrayed, multinational corporations would not be operating on the continent. It continues to be depicted as an underdeveloped continent so that Africans remain hopeless and desperate about their own future. In other words, “Afro-pessimism is an invented ideology”. Therefore, Afro-pessimism is not a fair or accurate political reflection of the actual mood of the African people. Rather, it is a racist ideology that represents a continuation of the “dark continent” thesis and the prejudicial view that “nothing good can ever come out of Africa.” (Momoh, 2003, p. 34).

The production of an “insecure Africa” is a narrative constructed by Afro-pessimists. Africa, often associated with civil wars or gang wars, has been transformed into a geography of violence, portraying the continent as a place defined by evil and conflict (Akçay, 2020). Conversely, Ahwireng-Obeng (2003) argues that Afro-pessimism is an unfounded discourse, noting that the concept has not gained universal acceptance due to the positive outcomes of economic development in Africa. Furthermore, he contends that such economic improvements foster optimism rather than pessimism.

A key argument of Afro-pessimists is the portrayal of Africa as a monolithic entity, evaluating African countries collectively (Evans, 2011, p. 404). Afro-pessimism has also been interpreted as the belief that Africa is the only region where the future is likely to be worse than its past. This perspective is rooted in the post-colonial realities of Africa and the limited levels of political and economic development in post-independence countries. The failure of independence to bring about an improved living conditions in many African countries has weakened optimistic views about Africa (Rieff, 1998/1999, p. 10). The colonial powers made no distinction between Arabs and Black peoples. For example, when Algerians fought their war of independence against French colonialism, they recognized that all African peoples shared a common struggle, and therefore, regardless of whether someone was “black” or Arab, they sought support from other African countries in the spirit of Pan-Africanism (Momoh, 2003, p. 37). When examining the continent of “Africa,” it is difficult to assess the differences ranging from skin color to the “unity” of more than 50 countries. The characterization of North African uprisings as the “Arab Spring” rather than as an African phenomenon illustrates this conceptual divide (Nothias, 2012, p. 55). Furthermore, the fact that students coming from Sub-Saharan African countries to North African countries for education are considered as “African students” highlights this difference (Moussa, 2022, p. 70). While Latin American footballers playing for European teams are referred to by their specific nationality, such as Argentinian or Brazilian, African footballers are often referred to simply as African (Ülker, 2016, p. 8).

The rise of Afro-pessimism homogenizes the so-called “African tragedy,” overlooking important differences and demonstrating that Africa lacks the political will and capacity to deal with its own problems. This concept largely portrays Africa’s situation as a consequence of its own actions and therefore argues that there is no hope of solving the continent's problems. Thus, it provided an opportunity for former colonial powers and the West in general to withdraw from Africa, despite the fact that many of these

problems were largely created by them (Ahluwalia, 2000, p. 30). Etounga-Manguelle (2000, p. 66) argues that colonial powers can no longer be held responsible for the current situation in Africa. He notes that despite decades of independence and the establishment of sovereign governments, many African nations remain more dependent on wealthy countries than ever before.

Some Studies Related to the Concept

Fair noted that when she asked her students what came to mind when they heard the words “Africa” and “Africans” during her lessons, they offered the following responses:

“To my students, ‘Africa’ is: ‘a basketcase,’ ‘jungle-covered,’ ‘big game, safari,’ ‘impoverished,’ ‘falling apart,’ ‘famine-plagued,’ ‘full of war,’ ‘AIDS-ridden,’ ‘torn by apartheid,’ ‘weird,’ ‘brutal,’ ‘savage,’ ‘primitive,’ ‘backward,’ ‘tribal,’ ‘undeveloped,’ and ‘black.’ Moreover, my students describe ‘Africans’ as: ‘having AIDS,’ ‘lazy,’ ‘crazy,’ ‘corrupt,’ ‘troubled,’ ‘underdeveloped’ ‘fight[ing] all the time,’ ‘brutal,’ ‘savage,’ ‘exotic,’ ‘sexually active,’ ‘backward,’ ‘tribal,’ ‘primitive,’ and again ‘black.’ (1993, p. 5).

Schorr (2011, pp. 28-36) discusses eight elements of Afro-pessimism. The first of these is homogeneity. The term 'Africa' is frequently used as if it refers to a single country rather than a continent. This leads to all the negative developments occurring in more than 50 countries being grouped together and perceived as events happening in “Africa”. The second is the colonial mythology known as the “Dark Continent”. This view argues that Africa is a place that has made no contribution to world history and is the darkest place in history. Thus, it is assumed that “bad things” have always happened “there”. Thirdly, there is the perception, which also existed during the colonial period, that Africa is a source of disease. For example, Africa is very frequently mentioned in news regarding AIDS. Fourth, Africa is portrayed as a place of starvation. In Western media, “children with swollen bellies, flies around their heads and pleading looks” are frequently shown. Fifth, Africa is represented as being limited to National Geographic. It is a widespread perception that Africans continue to live in small tribes in their villages, as they did in the pre-colonial era. Violent conflicts between tribes can also be mentioned as the sixth reason. The instability arising from tribes constantly engaged in violent conflict remains a problem. The problem of governance and political instability in Africa is the seventh reason. Civil wars and coups in Africa create an image of a continent composed of countries incapable of governing themselves. Finally, it is possible to state the perception of poverty on the continent based on many economic indicators. These factors contribute to reinforcing Africa's negative image. They reinforce a monolithic and pessimistic portrayal of Africa in the global consciousness.

Momoh (2003, pp. 33-34, 51) characterizes Afro-pessimism as the ideology of a diverse group of actors. These groups can be identified as “many of the Africanists, the donor and charity community, international money-lenders, some neo-liberal and

postmodernist African scholars, and above all, some New Left converts”. Afro-pessimism is viewed as a result of the West's failure to explain the political, social, and economic realities of Africa. Furthermore, rather than acknowledging this analytical failure, Afro-pessimists have blamed Africans for Africa's “bad” situation.

The Economist, in its May 2000 issue titled “The Hopeless Continent” addressed the issue of Africa. Overall, pessimism leads to a lack of belief that the African continent can overcome its problems such as poverty, health, and development. When these approaches are examined, Afro-pessimism suggests a discourse of measurement that evaluates the continent's failures based on standards defined by the West (Nothias, 2012, pp. 54,57). It is also possible to illustrate the limitations of the “continent” approach towards Africa with an example from Europe. For instance, while the genocides in Bosnia and Albania are never used to represent Europe as a whole, the use of the term “Africa” for events occurring in some African countries has become a general practice (Gilbert and Reynolds, 2008, p. 418).

As shown in Figure 1, categories (1) and (2) indicate that Africa has been inaccurately assessed by Western racists or media, suggesting that the continent's challenges do not inherently originate from Africa itself. In categories (3) and (4), the challenges of Africa are discussed, and the problems of African governments are particularly emphasized. (5) refers to the hopelessness of Africa and the insolubility of its problems. Therefore, it is possible to consider (5) as the most extreme Afro-pessimist position.

	<i>(1) Africa is misrepresented by racists</i>	<i>(2) Africa is misrepresented by Western media</i>	<i>(3) Africa is in trouble but it can be fixed</i> <i>Version 1</i>	<i>(4) Africa is in trouble but it can be fixed</i> <i>Version 2</i>	<i>(5) Africa is hopeless and cannot be fixed</i>
<i>What is the problem?</i>	Africans are portrayed negatively by Western racists	Africa is portrayed negatively by Western media	African client states are run by poor leaders	Africa is badly run and Africans are incapable of governing themselves	Africans are incapable of running things
<i>Who is to blame?</i>	Racists negatively stereotype Africans (Western racism is the problem, not Africa)	Journalists construct negative representations (Western media are the problem, not Africa)	Bad African governments and neo colonialism (The West is complicit in the problem)	Africans are to blame (The West is not the problem, it is the solution)	Africans are to blame (The West is not the problem or the solution)

<i>What is the solution?</i>	Attack racist portrayals	Rebrand Africa to create good representations	New African leaders are needed to create better governance	Recolonisation (by the West, the UN or China)	Give up on Africa, excise it from the world community
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Figure 1: Afro-pessimism Types. Source: de B'éri & Louw, 2011, p. 336.

The Economist, in its December 2011 issue, changed its approach from its previous “the hopeless continent” narrative by choosing “Africa Rising” as its cover title. *The Economist's* shift in perspective on Africa has been interpreted as confirmation of the continent's changing economic conditions. In November 2012, in an interesting coincidence, *Time's* cover was the same as *The Economist's* cover the previous year: “Africa rising”. The cover in question appeared in *Time's* European, Middle Eastern, and African editions; it was not used in the US and Asian editions. *Time's* cover from March 30, 1998, makes the situation even more interesting: “Africa Rising” (Maritz, 2012). It is also possible to give an example a story titled “Africa: A Grim Picture” from *The Washington Post* dated June 21, 1997 (Ahwireng-Obeng, 2003, p. 141). These shifting dates and thematic similarities illustrate how narratives of both African progress and pessimism are constructed. Perry (2012) argues that the transition between “pessimism” and “rising” is complex, stating that “but if Afro-pessimism is outdated, undiluted Afro-optimism is premature”.

Gilbert and Reynolds (2008, pp. xviii- xix) discuss various perceptions of Africa. These perceptions generally reinforce Afro-pessimistic views. They include primitive Africa, wild and dangerous Africa, exotic Africa, unspoiled Africa, utopian Africa, and broken Africa. It is particularly important to note that all these diverse understandings of Africa are not entirely wrong. In fact, it is possible to find evidence supporting each of these claims. However, there are also many situations that are not as perceived. For instance, there are rhinos and lions in Africa, but most Africans have never seen either of them. While contemporary Africa continues to grapple with challenges such as poverty and conflict, these singular narratives fail to capture the continent's full complexity.

In their study, Schraeder and Endless (1998, pp. 30-32) found that 73% of the 1168 articles about Africa published in *The New York Times* between 1955 and 1995 contained negative content. Béni (2021, pp. 184-190) notes that the term “Africa” is preferred even when a country or region is mentioned in the news. Several examples illustrate this tendency toward overgeneralization. For instance, in the headline “EU would stop the refugee influx with African investment,” the word “Africa” specifically refers to North Africa within the article. Likewise, in the headline “NBA to open academies in Africa and India,” “Africa” actually refers to Senegal. This practice reinforces Afro-pessimism as a simplistic approach that does not differentiate between African countries. Consequently, if a negative development occurs in “Africa,” it is

frequently attributed to “Africa” as a whole, even if the event affects only a specific country or region. Furthermore, the most frequently used verbs in these headlines, such as “die,” “kill,” “attack,” “want,” and “shoot,” all have negative connotations. In her analysis of 382 articles from Hungarian online news outlets between January 1, 2015, and December 31, 2017. According to the sentiment analysis conducted on the news, 58% were negative and 26% were positive. Violence and terrorism emerged as the most prominent themes associated with these negative emotions.

Bleich (2020, pp. 1775-1785) examined 139,012 news articles published in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* between 1 January 1994 and 31 December 2018. These articles included the terms Africa, African, or Africans within their titles or body text. Of the total, 73,995 (53%) were categorized as negative articles and 65,017 (47%) positive articles. The analysis identified several prominent negative topics, categorized as follows: Conflict 92,025, Disease 29,764, Poverty 27,423, Migration 23,985 Political Problems 20,873.

Conclusion

Statements such as “There have been numerous coup attempts in Africa this year,” “A leader on trial for genocide,” and “Thousands of people who died due to civil war”—which period of African history do they refer to? Fifty years ago, or last year? Or could we hear similar sentences again in ten years?

When discussing Afro-pessimism, it is crucial to clarify which “Africa” is being addressed. It should be remembered that we are referring to a continent composed of 54 countries. Thus, the fundamental question to ask an Afro-pessimist is: “What do you mean by Africa?”. For Afro-pessimists, there is only one country called “Africa”. In this view, “Africa” is treated as a single, homogeneous entity that disregards significant differences in development among failing states, more prosperous states, and other diverse political and economic contexts across the continent.

While the claims of Afro-pessimism are often based on factual data, they rely on a selective use of information. Statistics such as high infant mortality rates, the frequency of coups, or limited internet access are used to demonstrate the continent’s “bad” situation. Indeed, food and water shortages, coups, poverty, and many other problems have persisted in Africa for decades. However, this study argues that addressing Africa’s challenges may first require confronting the pessimistic narratives surrounding the continent. If we acknowledge a persistent pessimism about Africa, an important question emerges: about which continent can we truly be optimistic? As Gilbert and Reynolds (2008, p. 315) point out, “perhaps the next 40 years will be kinder to Africa than were the previous 100”.

It is said that Zeuxis also painted a picture of a child carrying grapes, and when he saw birds flying straight to those grapes, he became angry and said: “I have painted the grapes better than the child, because if I had made (the child) perfect, the birds would have been afraid of him”. (Plinius Secundus, 2024, p. 45). Within the scope of this study, we may ask: Which is Africa? The bird, the grape, the child. If the image of Africa

(grapes) painted by Afro-pessimism were truly “perfect” in its depiction of reality, the birds (other peoples and states of the world) would be afraid.

Conflict of Interest

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

Notes on Contributor

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The G20's Engagement with Coups and Security in the Sahel: External Intervention and its Limits in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger¹

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Abstract:

In recent years, military takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have seen the Sahel plunged into deeper political instability. At the same time, the region remains a hotspot for global counterterrorism efforts, with G20 members like France and the European Union (EU) having been involved through military operations and security partnerships. These overlapping crises raise the questions of how G20 countries have responded to these coups and whether the push for stability is coming at the cost of democratic values. Through a descriptive analytical approach, this paper takes a closer look at how the G20, not as a single voice, but through the actions of key members, has managed its security relationships with the region's new military governments. It reflects on France's military withdrawal from its former sphere of influence, how EU training missions have shifted or stalled, how Western powers have adjusted their security roles in Niger after the 2023 coup and competing intra-G20 interests. While many G20 actors claim to support democratic governance, their continued security engagement suggests a more complicated reality. The paper argues that the G20's security approach in the Sahel often prioritises short-term stability and counterterrorism over long-term democratic accountability. It calls for a more consistent and coherent multilateral strategy that takes regional dynamics into consideration and puts greater emphasis on supporting African-led efforts for peace and security.

Keywords:

G20; Coups; Sahel; External Intervention; Mali; Burkina Faso; Niger.

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Introduction

Africa continues to record the highest number of coups worldwide, with the Sahel region experiencing the greatest concentration. McGowan & Johnson (1984:634-635) define coups as “events in which existing regimes are suddenly and illegally displaced by the action of relatively small groups, in which members of the military, police, or security forces of the state play a key role, either on their own or in conjunction with a number of civil servants or politicians.” In the aftermath of independence, many African states inherited sizeable, well-trained armed forces and powerful traditional authorities, both of which had been used under colonial rule to suppress internal dissent (Wilén, 2024). The legacies of this period included the politicisation of the military and the militarisation of politics, creating a profound civil–military imbalance at the point of independence. Since then, the military has remained central in many post-colonial African states, either through leaders who emerged from liberation struggles with military backing, or through regimes that have maintained power by securing the loyalty of the armed forces (Wilén, 2024).

The Sahel has become a hub of global insecurity plagued by insurgencies, jihadist groups, extreme poverty, food insecurity and a resurgence of military coups. The region has long grappled with deep-rooted social, political, and economic challenges. Between 2018 and 2022, the return of military coups highlighted a leadership crisis in dealing with issues such as poverty, terrorism, and violent extremism (Akinola & Makombe, 2024). Since 2020, a fresh wave of coups has swept across six countries—Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea, Sudan and Chad. These upheavals share several underlying drivers: fragile political and institutional structures, persistent security threats and insurgencies, economic strain and competition over resources, the role of external actors, and rivalries within the armed forces. The frequency of military coups in the Sahel has seen the region being plunged into deeper political instability. Furthermore, the recurrence of coups has increasingly made unconstitutional changes of government appear acceptable to the public, particularly against the backdrop of declining trust in state institutions. (Tshuma, Driessen, Bakari, Tine & Fantappie, 2025) At the same time, the Sahel remains a hotspot for global counterterrorism efforts, with G20 members like France and the EU having been involved through military operations and security partnerships.

This article examines the most recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, showing how they pose challenges not only for African institutions but also for external actors such as the G20. It asks how the G20, particularly through the actions of France and the EU, and to a lesser extent the United States (US) (the inclusion of the US is warranted given its significant counterterrorism footprint in the region, particularly in Niger, where it operated a military base prior to the 2023 coup) has responded to these coups via its security agenda. This question is significant given the evident tension between G20 members' security priorities and their stated commitment to democratic governance. The article reflects on the fallout from France's military withdrawal from Mali, how EU training missions have shifted or stalled, how Western powers have adjusted their security roles in Niger after the 2023 coup and competing intra-G20 interests. It argues

that, in practice, the G20's security engagement in the Sahel tends to favour short-term stability and counterterrorism over longer-term democratic accountability, exposing important gaps in its Africa agenda.

Methodologically, the article uses a descriptive analytical approach, drawing on secondary academic literature, policy documents from the G20, the EU and African Union (AU) as well as institutional reports from organisations such as the International Crisis Group (ICG) and media sources. The analysis traces the evolution of G20-aligned security engagement in the Sahel before and after the recent wave of coups identifying patterns, contradictions and implications for the group's Africa agenda. The article has five sections: 1. a contextual overview of the Sahel coups; 2. the G20's security engagement in Africa; 3. the shift in security posture in response to the coups; 4. an analysis of the G20's security posture in the region and implications for its Africa agenda; and 5. recommendations with concluding reflections.

The Sahel Coups

Since the attainment of independence in the mid-twentieth century, military coups have constituted a defining and enduring element of Africa's political trajectory, with armed interventions recurrently disrupting constitutional rule. Empirical evidence underscores the prevalence of coups across both temporal and regional contexts. In West Africa, for example, the period between 1955 and 2004 witnessed 44 successful coups, 43 failed attempts, and 82 plots (McGowan, 2006). Likewise, sub-Saharan Africa recorded 80 successful coups, 108 failed attempts and 139 plots between 1956 and 2001 (McGowan, 2003). More broadly, Powell & Thyne (2011) observe that Africa has historically exhibited a coup success rate approaching 50 percent, with over 215 recorded attempts since independence.

While the Sahel region has long been characterized and perceived through the nexus of intersecting crises: transnational crime, food insecurity, migration pressures, climate vulnerability, underdevelopment and poverty (Africa Renewal, 2018; Tony Blaire Institute Global, 2024), the past two decades has seen it become the epicenter of political instability in Africa, particularly through a dramatic resurgence of military coups. Military takeovers in the Sahel have become both frequent and widespread, cementing the Sahel's reputation as the epicentre of Africa's democratic backsliding (Washington Post, 2025). Since 2010, every Sahelian country (with the exception of Senegal) has experienced at least one coup or attempted coup, in some cases multiple times. This recurring pattern has prompted Western media to describe the area as Africa's 'coup belt' (LaFranchi, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023). Notwithstanding, the resurgence of military coups in 2020 have significantly reshaped the political landscape of the Sahel.

Mali

In August 2020, Colonel Assimi Goïta led a military coup in Mali that ousted the democratically elected government of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. The takeover

followed months of mass protests, with Malians calling for Keita's resignation over unfulfilled campaign promises, his inability to address terrorism and insurgency, persistent instability in the north and pervasive corruption, among other grievances (Adetuyi, 2021). In September 2020, former defence minister Colonel Bah Ndaw was appointed head of state. Yet tensions soon arose between him and the military, which retained considerable influence. A cabinet reshuffle that dismissed two senior officers sparked a crisis, prompting Assimi Goïta to launch a second coup in May 2021 that ousted Ndaw from power (Mahmoud & Taifouri, 2023).

Colonel Goïta has served as Mali's transitional president since 2021. Nearly four years after the coup, what was intended as a "transition period" has instead hardened into a prolonged stalemate, with a democratic resolution appearing increasingly unlikely (Le Cam, 2024). Although the junta initially pledged to hand power to a civilian government by the end of 2022, it has repeatedly postponed this commitment. Presidential elections were first rescheduled to February 2024 only to be postponed indefinitely in September 2023, citing technical reasons. In April 2025, a junta organised national conference recommended Goïta remain as president until 2030 and that all political parties be dissolved (Allegrozzi, 2025), effectively foreclosing any near-term prospect of a democratic transfer of power. This follows the trajectory set in motion after the 2020 coup, entrenching authoritarian rule. It is important to note, however, that Mali's democratisation since 1992 had already been fragile, with successive civilian governments struggling to consolidate democratic practices. This shallow democratic base created fertile ground for insecurity, corruption, and economic fragility, leaving the state exposed to repeated coups. In Mali, military takeovers have become a cyclical feature of politics, since gaining independence from France, and the persistent involvement of the armed forces in governance has undermined institutional continuity and stunted the maturation of democratic structures (Adetuyi, 2021).

Burkina Faso

In January 2022, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba overthrew President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré and established a junta under the banner of the Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration (MPSR), in Burkina Faso. Damiba's rule, however, was short-lived, as his inability to deliver meaningful progress on security fuelled frustration among both the military and civilians (Reuters, 2022). By September 2022, Captain Ibrahim Traoré, a relatively unknown officer who had initially backed the January coup, led another takeover that removed Damiba from power. Traoré justified his move by pointing to Damiba's failure to contain worsening jihadist violence, notably highlighted by the deadly Gaskindé ambush, as well as Damiba's reluctance to broaden international security partnerships (Aikins, 2025).

Since gaining independence in 1960, Burkina Faso has experienced seven successful coups, occurring in 1966, 1980, 1983, 1987, and twice in 2022. This excludes the failed attempt of September 2015 and the popular uprising of October 2014. In the current regional context, the most recent coup highlights the challenges created by ineffective

governance, particularly administrations that fail to meet public demands for transparency and security (Obinna & Semudara, 2024). In September 2023, elections that were to take place in July 2024, with the intention of restoring democratic civilian government rule were deemed not a priority and postponed indefinitely by the military junta led by Traoré (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024).

Niger

On 26 July 2023, Niger experienced a military coup when factions of the armed forces declared they had seized power and suspended the constitution. The crisis began with the presidential guard, an elite unit tasked with preventing coups, placing President Mohamed Bazoum, perceived as an ally of the West against jihadist militants (Suleiman, 2023), under house arrest. His attempt to reshuffle military leadership, including plans to dismiss the guard's commander, General Abdourahmane Tchiani, appears to have provoked the move. By the following day, the wider army announced its support for the junta, framing its decision as an effort to "avoid a deadly confrontation between the various forces that could ... lead to a bloodbath." (IISS, 2023) The junta's cited poor economic management and the deteriorating security situation under Bazoum as a justification for the coup (Yabi, 2023).

Since gaining independence from France in 1960, Niger's political trajectory has been heavily shaped by the military, with domestic political crises frequently serving as triggers for intervention. Yet, the coup d'état of 26 July 2023 took many observers by surprise, as it was not preceded by widespread public protests, unlike Mali's 2020 takeover. Growing anti-French sentiment within the Nigerien armed forces further strained the military cooperation that President Bazoum had sought to deepen with France, ultimately fuelling his declining support among military ranks. (Tschörner, 2023) This mirrors developments in Burkina Faso, where frustrations over ineffective governance and resentment towards foreign security partnerships also created conditions for repeated coups, underscoring the shared structural vulnerabilities across the Sahel. A year following the 2023 coup, the junta in Niger dismantled the most vital democratic institutions by doing away with the constitution, removing elected representatives and suspending political parties. An authoritarian regime was established, under the pretence of a transitional process aimed at renewing the political system, with no apparent end in sight (Tschörner, 2024).

Some of the common patterns across these countries is escalating insecurity and insurgency, weak governance and public discontent, an anti-French sentiment and escalating violence amid political upheaval. For example, fatalities from extremist violence in the region has increased between 2020 and 2024, reaching a record high in the first half of 2024 (Adeoye, 2024). Even so, the Sahel demonstrates a convergence of deep-rooted structural vulnerabilities that have created fertile conditions for repeated coups. Chief among these is the persistent insecurity linked to the spread of jihadist insurgencies, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger (Washington Post, 2025). Groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the

Greater Sahara (ISGS) not only undermine state authority in peripheral regions but also expose the military's inability to contain violence, a failure that has eroded public trust in elected governments (ICG, 2025). This insecurity is further compounded by chronic state fragility, where legitimacy and service delivery are weakened by fragile institutions, pervasive corruption, and limited governance capacity (ICG, 2021).

The G20 and Security Engagement in Africa

The Group of Twenty (G20) brings together 19 countries (G7 countries included)³ namely: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Türkiye, the United Kingdom and the United States—plus the AU⁴ and the EU. Collectively, G20 members account for around 85% of global GDP, more than 75% of world trade, and roughly two-thirds of the global population. As the leading forum for international economic cooperation, the G20 plays a central role in shaping and reinforcing the global architecture of governance on key international economic challenges. (G20 India, 2023) This economic weight also gives the group significant influence in the field of security, particularly in regions like Africa where instability directly affects global markets, migration and counter-terrorism efforts. The G20 and G7 have acknowledged that insecurity in the Sahel drives irregular migration to Europe and beyond, prompting calls for coordinated responses with regional bodies like the AU and United Nations (UN). (G7G20, 2024) The G20 itself is not a collective security actor, instead its influence on African security stems from the actions of individual member states, mainly France, the EU, and, to a lesser extent, the US, who shape security policy through financial and military engagement. The G20's leadership operates on an annual rotation system, with each member in turn hosting the yearly summit, where decisions of shared concern are reached through consensus. Through its summits and declarations, the G20 serves as a key forum for dialogue and cooperation, enabling collective responses to global challenges and contributing to the shaping of the international order (SALIA, nd).

For nearly a decade, up until the first in the recent wave of coups in 2020, the EU and its member states cooperated closely with democratically elected governments in the central Sahel as they grappled with escalating insecurity, driven largely by jihadist insurgencies (ICG, 2025). This cooperation was underpinned by the EU Sahel Security and Development Strategy, adopted in 2011, which was renewed and renamed The European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel in 2021 (Martín, Cornejo & Llauger, 2024). The previous strategy had invested heavily in security, humanitarian and

³ The G7 (Group of Seven) consists of France, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, Italy, and Canada. The EU is also represented at summits.

⁴ Joined the G20 in 2023. In 2014 the AU formulated a plan for the Sahel, the *Strategy of the African Union for the Sahel Region*, founded on three core pillars, namely: governance; security; and development. The African Union Mission for Mali and the Sahel (MISAHÉL) serves as the AU's foremost mechanism for ensuring the effective implementation of its strategy for the Sahel region. See: <https://peaceau.org/uploads/auc-psc-449.au-strategu-for-sahel-region-11-august-2014.pdf>

development areas in the Sahel against the backdrop of wanting to control migration flows from Africa and counter terrorist activity in the region. The integrated strategy, meanwhile, attempted to increase the focus on state governance through the promotion of state legitimacy (European Parliament, 2021). Nevertheless, European authorities provided training and support to national armed forces, while also pursuing a more comprehensive approach that included funding for economic development and community-based initiatives. Security assistance, military training missions, and development aid formed part of a broader European strategy, spearheaded by France but also involving partners such as the US and the UN. Collectively, these actors sought to stabilise the central Sahel and promote good governance (ICG, 2025).

In the Sahel the G20's security footprint shows up through the choices of key members, and also through the AU (as a new member) with G20 support. Historically France has been the backbone of the G20-aligned security operations in the Sahel. For example, following the 2012 Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali, quickly overshadowed by jihadist insurgencies, and a military coup that severely undermined the government's ability to respond, France initiated Operation Serval. The counterterrorism mission, which had previously seen some success in neighbouring Mauritania, was launched to stop the insurgents' push towards central Mali (Tuma, 2022).

While Serval made significant gains in recapturing territory, insecurity quickly spread across the broader Sahel. In 2014, France transformed Operation Serval into Operation Barkhane, broadening its mandate to cover the entire Sahel region and basing its headquarters in N'Djamena, Chad. Unlike Serval, Barkhane pursued wider ambitions, both geographically and strategically, moving beyond counterterrorism to also engage in aspects of state-building. At the same time, European partners began to play a larger role. Their involvement grew significantly with the launch of the Takuba Task Force in 2020, which brought together European special forces to support and accompany Malian troops on operations (Tuma, 2022). It is worth mentioning that the United Kingdom (UK), though not an EU member, also contributed to the multilateralization of security efforts in the Sahel. In December 2020 the UK government deployed about 300 troops to the United Nations' Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) where they were set to provide a highly specialised reconnaissance capability, conduct patrols to gather intelligence and engage with the local population to help the UN respond to threats from violent extremism, and weak governance. Furthermore, the UK maintained 3 Chinook helicopters and 100 personnel in a logistics role supporting France's Operation Barkhane (UK Government, 2020). However, following the 2021 coup and the Malian junta's partnership with the Wagner Group, the UK announced in November 2022 that it would withdraw its MINUSMA contingent earlier than planned, citing the junta's restrictions on multinational forces and the deterioration of the operating environment (Brooke-Holland, 2022). European contributions also expanded through participation in MINUSMA and the EU Training Mission, reflecting a broader multilateralization of security efforts in the Sahel (Tuma, 2022).

Furthermore, the EU has complemented these efforts through strategic frameworks and security cooperation. A 2020 resolution from the European Parliament recommended a comprehensive mid- to long-term Sahel policy, urging support for development, resilience, and security sector reform alongside soft power avenues like non-lethal training and governance strengthening (European Parliament, 2020). Moreover, the Alliance for the Sahel, driven by France, Germany, the EU, and multilateral banks, pursued projects linking security with development (e.g., rural development, youth inclusion, governance) to reinforce the broader stability agenda in the region (Gorman & Chauzal, 2018). The Sahel Partnership Action Plan (2019), endorsed by G7 (aligning with G20 priorities), affirmed the need to work with the G5 Sahel alliance⁵ and regional institutions to concurrently enhance security and developmental outcomes within a humanitarian–peace–development nexus (G7G20, 2019).

More recently, as political shifts and coups wrecked civilian governance in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, France has increasingly withdrawn its presence. The collapse of the G5 Sahel and the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States⁶ (AES) marked a major turning point in the region's security architecture (Gouvy & Ellis, 2024). Despite years of large-scale military interventions, there was a prevailing perception that France had failed to decisively curb the jihadist threat, as attacks on communities and security forces persisted. In Mali, France was expelled by the junta in 2022, followed by the removal of MINUSMA in 2023; while in December 2023 Niger's junta suspended two EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations in the country and deepened its security cooperation with Russia, following the path already taken by its neighbours (Wilén, 2024). While the French and EU missions in the Sahel reflect the operational arm of the G20 aligned security policy, it is also worth mentioning the G20 Compact with Africa (CwA), co-chaired by Germany and South Africa, which was established within the G20 finance track to promote private sector-led development and improve the investment environment (G20 CwA, 2025). Although mainly economic, indirectly the initiative supports stabilisation by promoting resilient state structures that underpin security.

However, despite more than a decade of counterterrorism engagement in the Sahel, Western involvement has often been driven by national self-interest, even when portrayed within a broader security narrative. The US, for example, continues operations against groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Islamic State in the Sahel Province, strategies that largely bypass the root causes of local instability. Similarly, Germany's deployment in Mali and Italy's presence in Niger reflect European

⁵ A regional organisation created in 2014 by Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad to promote development and security among its members. However, Mali withdrew in 2022, followed by Burkina Faso and Niger in 2023. As a result, Chad and Mauritania subsequently announced the dissolution of the alliance.

⁶ In 2023 the military governments of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger formed the Alliance of Sahel States, a mutual defence pact and confederation.

concerns over irregular migration routes to Europe, while France remains strategically tied to Nigerien uranium to fuel its domestic nuclear power plants. (Sabbe & Reyniers, 2023) These security interventions, framed as stabilisation efforts, often reveal the security-first pragmatism underpinning Western engagement.

The G20's Security Posture Shift in Response to the Sahel Coups

Following the 2020 and 2021 coups in Mali and the junta's turn to Russia's security support, France withdrew its troops from Mali, ending a nine-year operation in the country (like the UK exit, this reflected the pattern of Western disengagement triggered by the coups and the entry of Russian private military actors). In recent years, the French military presence in Mali has grown increasingly unpopular, with many Malians expressing resentment towards the continued involvement of their former colonial power (Al Jazeera, 2022). The decision to withdraw, by France, pointed to a major shift away from counterterrorism basing in a junta state. Subsequently, the EU decided to suspend parts of its training mission in Mali due to concerns over insufficient security guarantees from the authorities in Mali over the non-interference of the Wagner Group (Reuters, 2022). This culminated in the end of the EU Training Mission Mali in May 2024 (European Union External Action, 2024), signalling a deterioration in relations between the EU and Mali's military junta (VOA Africa, 2024). Like Mali, following the 2022 coups in Burkina Faso, France's withdrawal from the country coincided with Burkina Faso's pivot away from Western military cooperation, towards Russia. This pivot signalled a broader post-coup alignment in which the Sahel military leaders sought new partners while the Western G20 members reduced their footprint.

The 2023 Niger coup triggered immediate EU suspension of financial and security cooperation. The EU's announcement coincided with the AU's decision to issue a 15-day ultimatum to the coup leaders, demanding that they return to their barracks and reinstate the democratic constitution along with the suspended institutions (Beaumont, 2023). After the coup in July, in October the EU created a framework for restrictive measures with the aim of targeting those who undermine the stability, democracy, rule of law in the country, and constituted a threat to peace and security in the region. In December 2023, the junta in Niger announced that it was terminating the agreement that established the legal basis for the deployment of the EUCAP Sahel Niger mission and the EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger (EUMPM Niger). Consequently, the EU decided not to renew the EUMPM (Council of the European Union, 2024). In April 2024, the junta in Niger ordered the US to withdraw its military personnel from the country. The US agreed and withdrew its personnel from Niger's Air Base 101 near the airport in the capital Niamey (Reuters, 2024). Niger had long been a key partner for the US and French strategy to combat Jihadists in West Africa (France 24, 2024), as such the end of this partnership reinforced how coups can rupture even deep security relationships.

Analysis of the G20's Security Posture

Although the G20 is primarily an economic forum, the bloc increasingly intersects with security in Africa. The Sahel has become a key testing ground, where repeated coups, rising jihadist insurgencies, and international disengagement reveal the limits of external intervention. What can be observed is a set of patterns and dilemmas that highlight the contradictions in G20 engagement, as well as the implications for the group's Africa agenda.

Patterns and Dilemmas

1. Security-First Posture

While some members of the G20 have withdrawn from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, with counterterrorism operations terminated, the EU still maintains relations with central Sahelian states, particularly because countries such as Niger (under Bazoum) were an important partner in curbing migration to Europe. However, the EU does find itself in a bind in that the juntas are far from ideal partners but will likely still have to engage them in the future (ICG, 2024). France's last major military base in West Africa was handed over in 2025, with French officials stating that regional insecurity is no longer their responsibility, a clear signal of strategic disengagement (Cocks, 2025). Abandoning military cooperation suggests that security imperatives for the G20 members override democratic governance concerns, that is, while actors voice strong support for democratic transitions, in practice they prioritise counterterrorism cooperation to prevent instability and migration spillovers.

The case of the US Air Base 201 in Agadez, Niger, illustrates this dynamic. Built at a cost of \$110 million and operational from 2019, the base served as the centrepiece of US drone surveillance and counterterrorism operations across West Africa. Following the July 2023 coup, Niger's junta revoked the bilateral military cooperation agreement in March 2024 and ordered all US military personnel to leave the country. By August 2024, the withdrawal of approximately 1,000 US troops was complete, ending over a decade of American military presence in the country (VOA, 2024). The loss of Air Base 201 demonstrated how even deeply embedded security partnerships, underpinned by significant financial investment, can be abruptly severed when coups reconfigure a country's political orientation.

2. G20 Members Individual Agenda's

The G20 does not act as a collective security provider in Africa. Instead, responses are shaped by individual member-state interests and historical ties. For example, France has historically acted as the lead security actor in the Sahel, but its withdrawal has left a vacuum not easily filled by others. Germany's participation in MINUSMA in Mali came to an end in 2023 (Tull, 2024), while Italy maintained closer engagement with Niger, partly driven by concerns over terrorism and irregular migration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation-Italy, 2025). While the US had maintained a base

in Niger (essentially as a counterterrorism measure-as with most US bases in Africa), US presence was primarily framed through global anti-terror operations (Sabbe & Reyniers, 2023). These divergent motivations meant that when the coups triggered a cascade of expulsions, there was no unified G20 response; each member recalibrated its posture according to its own strategic calculus. There is no clear unified stance on coup-related crises, as such France, the EU and US's security posture is informed by their individual agenda's rather than any collective framework.

3. Intra-G20 Rivalries and the Impossibility of a Common Strategy

Beyond the fragmented responses of Western G20 members, a deeper structural impediment to a unified G20 strategy lies in the competing interests and geopolitical rivalries among G20 members themselves. Russia, China, and Turkey are not merely passive observers of the Sahel's post-coup realignment; they are active participants, pursuing security and economic agendas that directly compete with those of France, the EU, and the US. Russia's role is the most overt. Through the deployment of the Wagner Group (now reorganised under the Africa Corps), Moscow has positioned itself as the preferred security partner of the Sahel juntas, offering military support without governance conditions. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have all deepened their security ties with Russia following the expulsion of Western forces, receiving military equipment, training and personnel in exchange for access to natural resources and geopolitical alignment (Wilén, 2024).

China's engagement, while less militarised, is no less consequential. Beijing has pursued a strategy centred on economic investment, particularly in extractive industries, positioning itself as a partner that respects sovereignty and imposes no political conditions. In Niger, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has invested billions in the Agadem oil field and the 2,000-kilometre pipeline to the Benin coast, while in Mali, Chinese firms hold significant stakes in lithium mining at Goulamina (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). China has also expanded its arms exports to the Sahel, with at least ten shipments of military equipment delivered to Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in 2023 and 2024 through the state-owned manufacturer NORINCO (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). These economic and military engagements give China a stake in the stability of the juntas, placing it at odds with Western G20 members who advocate for democratic transitions.

Türkiye has emerged as another significant actor, filling gaps left by France's withdrawal. Since 2022, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger have received multiple shipments of Turkish defence articles, including TB2 combat drones that have become integral to the juntas' counterinsurgency operations (Atlantic Council, 2025). Türkiye's private military company, SADAT, has reportedly taken contracts in Burkina Faso and Niger, operating alongside Russian contractors rather than in competition with them (FPRI, 2025). Ankara's willingness to supply advanced military technology without the political conditionality attached to Western arms transfers has made it an attractive partner for the Sahel's military governments.

These competing engagements mean that the G20, as a forum, is structurally incapable of producing a unified security strategy for the Sahel. While Western members advocate for democratic restoration and conditional engagement, Russia, China, and Turkey benefit from the status quo and have no incentive to align with governance demands that could jeopardise their access to resources, markets and strategic influence. This intra-G20 rivalry does not merely complicate coordination; it fundamentally undermines the premise that the G20 can serve as a coherent platform for addressing the Sahel's security challenges.

4. Legitimacy Dilemma

Engagement with junta's risks undermining the G20's democracy rhetoric. Although the AU and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) condemned coups and imposed sanctions, some G20 actors were open to continued cooperation with transitional regimes to safeguard security interests i.e. Niger (Reuters, 2023). The contrast between ECOWAS and individual G20 members was particularly stark following the July 2023 Niger coup. Within days, ECOWAS imposed sweeping economic sanctions, including the closure of land and air borders, suspension of commercial and financial transactions, and the freezing of Niger's assets in regional banks. The bloc also issued a one-week ultimatum to the junta to reinstate President Bazoum, explicitly threatening military intervention, the strictest response ECOWAS had ever mounted against a member state (ICG, 2023). By contrast, while France condemned the coup and the EU suspended financial and security cooperation, no individual G20 member endorsed or materially supported the ECOWAS threat of military intervention. France, despite maintaining troops in Niger at the time, stopped short of backing a forceful restoration of constitutional order.

This gap between the regional body's willingness to confront coup leaders and the more cautious posture of G20 members, fuels perceptions that the G20 tolerates unconstitutional changes when convenient, which may erode local perception of external actors' commitment to democracy. However, with the AU now a permanent member of the G20, there is a strategic opening for Africa to influence the group's approach, especially regarding responses to coups which may help to address this legitimacy dilemma.

Implications for the G20 Agenda

The Sahel coups expose the structural weaknesses of the G20's Africa agenda. Firstly, the group is limited as a collective actor in that it is a consensus driven structure which prevents unified positions on security crises. This limitation is compounded by the fact that G20 members are not merely disengaged or indifferent, but in several cases are actively competing for influence in the Sahel. Russia, China, and Türkiye pursue security and economic partnerships with the very juntas that Western G20 members seek to pressure towards democratic transitions, making consensus on the Sahel structurally

unattainable. Instead, African engagement is led by a few members, undermining its credibility as a collective governance forum. Secondly, security responsibilities in the Sahel fall disproportionately on France, the EU, and the US. Their retrenchment from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger revealed the G20's over-reliance on Western powers. Thirdly, although the G20 regularly stresses governance and democracy in its rhetoric, in practice, members privilege short-term security imperatives over long-term democratic accountability. This contradiction undermines the group's legitimacy and erodes local confidence. Lastly, The AU and the ECOWAS often take firmer stances than individual G20 members. ECOWAS suspended Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger following their respective coups and imposed targeted sanctions, while the AU invoked its normative framework against unconstitutional changes of government. Yet G20 actions have not always aligned with these regional approaches. For example, while ECOWAS imposed comprehensive economic sanctions on Niger in 2023, including border closures and the suspension of financial transactions, the EU's response was limited to suspending cooperation agreements, and France's condemnation was not accompanied by material support for the regional bloc's enforcement measures. The AU's recent admission as a permanent G20 member offers both an opportunity and a test, that is whether its principles on democratic transitions can shape clearer engagement guidelines.

These dynamics highlight the need for frameworks that can balance security imperatives with governance commitments, while also amplifying African agency within the G20's security agenda. The following recommendations outline potential pathways for strengthening the G20's approach in Africa, with a focus on aligning rhetoric with practice, supporting legitimate institutions, and ensuring that security cooperation is both sustainable and politically credible.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Between 2020 and 2023, the Sahel became a flashpoint of democratic collapse, insurgent violence and geopolitical rivalry. The wave of coups was not isolated; it stemmed from a myriad of interconnecting issues such as deteriorating security, institutional failings and anti-Western sentiments, among others. The Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger cases reveal how military takeovers are framed as responses to insecurity and governance failures, even as they deepen democratic regression in the Sahel.

The Sahel coups underscore the tensions and shortcomings in how the G20 engages with African Security challenges. Fragmented responses, competing priorities, and the absence of a unified framework have exposed the limits of the G20's collective role, while security-first strategies have often undermined its own commitments to democracy and governance. At the same time, the AU's new seat at the G20 offers a historic opportunity to embed African perspectives more deeply into global security governance. To translate this opportunity into practice, the following recommendations are structured around three connected priorities: fostering coherence among G20

members, integrating African agency, and striking a more credible balance between security imperatives and governance commitments.

Firstly, better coherence is needed among G20 members through a stronger joint G20-AU cooperation on security in the Sahel. Through this platform, the AU's strategy for the Sahel can be strengthened, and information-sharing can be done to better coordinate counterterrorism measures in the region. Secondly, the integration of African agency through the institutionalisation of the AU and the ECOWAS Sahel approaches within the G20 security dialogues. The G20 would provide financial and technical support to African-led stabilisation missions instead of defaulting to member led military operations. Lastly, conditioning G20 support on any parallel commitments to governance reforms, which includes institution building and decentralisation, is key, as well as ensuring that democracy support programmes remain imperative even when there are security crises. However, there is a caveat in that conditionality-based approaches carry inherent risks in the current geopolitical environment. As the cases of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have demonstrated, military juntas have readily turned to Russia and, to a lesser extent, China as alternative partners who impose no governance conditions on their security and economic cooperation. The deployment of Russian military personnel in Mali and Burkina Faso, and Niger's deepening ties with Moscow following the expulsion of Western forces, illustrate how strict conditionality, if applied unilaterally by Western G20 members, may accelerate the juntas' pivot eastward rather than incentivise democratic reform. For this reason, conditionality should not be conceived as a punitive mechanism wielded by individual G20 members, but rather embedded within a broader multilateral framework, coordinated with the AU and ECOWAS. Such an approach would need to combine governance benchmarks with positive incentives, including increased development financing, trade facilitation and support for local service delivery, that make democratic transitions materially attractive to both political elites and populations. This would help to mitigate the risk that conditionality simply drives Sahelian states further into the orbit of actors who offer unconditional support.

The G20, alongside the AU, will have to be steadfast in tackling the cycle of coups in the Sahel and the stalled democratic transitions. Rather than defaulting to a binary choice between engagement and isolation, the G20 should pursue a calibrated strategy that maintains diplomatic channels with transitional regimes while upholding clear governance expectations, leveraging the AU's legitimacy and normative authority to ensure that the cost of democratic backsliding remains high, even in a multipolar environment where Russia and China offer alternative pathways.

Conflict of Interest

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

Notes on Contributor

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Jihadist Groups and Water's Weaponization: Environmental Terrorism in Lake Chad Basin¹

Ilas Touazi²

Abstract:

Regardless of whether environmental terrorism is considered a tool or a target for vital natural resources, its objective remains to achieve political or ideological ends. This is why jihadist groups have focused their activities on controlling water resources, causing a security dilemma, particularly in the Lake Chad Basin region (LCB). Firstly, this geographical area has been significantly affected by global warming and intensified conflicts, creating an insecure context for water scarcity. Secondly, this is evident in the control of water supplies for military purposes by extremist and jihadist factions, namely groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and Islamic State, particularly Boko Haram, which seize water reserves to limit access for local populations and use them to strengthen their political power. The research was underpinned by case study methodology, providing a comprehensive analysis of the complex issues surrounding environmental terrorism and the militarisation of water resources by extremist groups in the Lake Chad Basin. Consequently, the countries of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) must reorient their anti-terrorism cooperation policies in the region towards an integrated approach to water security to be able to tackle the transnationalisation of environmental terrorism employed as a weapon by jihadists and to recognise that peace is achieved through water management, rather than military force.

Keywords:

Water's
Weaponization;
Jihadist Groups;
Environmental
Terrorism; Hydro-
Terrorism; Lake Chad
Basin (LCB); Lake Chad
Basin Commission
(LCBC).

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1. Introduction

Environmental terrorism, also known as 'ecological terrorism,'³ has essentially evolved into a complex security dilemma with multiple dimensions. Indeed, from a legal perspective, harming the environment is considered 'terrorism' when it violates national and international environmental protection rules, in times of peace or war, and only if the violent act or terrorist threat has key characteristics linked to clear objectives and targets a symbolically significant target (Schwartz, 1998). With the emergence of undeniable climate change, environmental terrorism is causing unprecedented levels of human, national, and regional insecurity. The use of resources as weapons in armed conflicts, particularly water supplies in vulnerable societies, is triggering global challenges (Kohler, 2019). In line with those concerns, terrorist organisations like the Islamic State (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda, for instance, have already demonstrated their ability to take advantage of environmental degradation by using water resources as instruments to control the populace. Thus, another example of environmental terrorism is the strategies employed by ISIS and Al-Qaeda branches in Africa, where they target the environment to create fear for political, ideological, and religious objectives. The destruction of the environment through terror attacks has been exploited by Islamist terrorist organisations (ITOs) to instil panic and achieve organisational goals (Spadaro, 2020). Contrary to Islamic principles, environmental terrorism has been used by the main jihadist groups active in the Lake Chad region, with the militarisation of water as a weapon of warfare, creating a lasting threat of terror and regional insecurity.

The study is based on answering the following core research question:

How do non-state actors, namely violent extremist movements (VEMs) and jihadist groups, exploit environmental terrorism by using water as a weapon to strengthen their hydro hegemony and consolidate their dominance in the Lake Chad basin?

To address the central question, the study poses a series of sub-questions, formulated as follows:

- What is the causal link between climate change factors, water scarcity, and the rise of transnational terrorism?
- How have climate changes that affected the geography and hydrography of the Lake Chad basin been a catalyst for the emergence of jihadist groups in the region?
- What are the main strategies of jihadist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, particularly Boko Haram, concerning the weaponisation of water resources in the Lake Chad Basin region?

³ There is a conceptual difference between environmental terrorism and ecoterrorism. Environmental terrorism is a broader term that encompasses a range of actions carried out by individuals or groups against the environment, including acts of violence or destruction. In contrast, ecoterrorism specifically refers to violent actions by groups or individuals who oppose environmental policies. "Ecoterrorism" was coined in 1983 by writer and libertarian theorist Ron Arnold. Subsequently, the term was adopted by American authorities, particularly the FBI, to refer to the actions of certain radical environmental movements.

- What are the main regional policies implemented by the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) to combat the militarisation of water resources by jihadist groups, particularly in terms of water management, climate action, and human security?

The analysis will be guided primarily by the following hypotheses: Hegemonic water configurations and power asymmetries in the Lake Chad region have been shaped by the emergence of jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, exploiting climate change through the use of environmental terrorism, including the militarisation of water as a strategy of war, creating a transnational threat and regional insecurity. In such an insecure context, regional actors, led by the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), have implemented a set of strengthened mechanisms for water management, climate action, and human security.

The aim of this article is, on the one hand, to explain how environmental terrorism linked to climate change is exacerbating the water shortage crisis, having a lasting impact on human security and stability, which are already vulnerable in the Lake Chad Basin region, with jihadist groups weaponizing water resources to assert their dominance. On the other hand, the study sought to identify the measures that have been put in place to help curb this phenomenon and address the challenges linked to terrorism and environmental change through efforts to counter the militarisation of water resources by jihadist groups as part of the Lake Chad Basin Commission's (LCBC) regional strategy for water resource management, climate action, peace and human security.

The research paper is structured as follows. After the introduction, which includes the problem, the main issue, and sub-questions, as well as the hypotheses and research objectives, along with the methodology, the literature review provides an overview of the interrelationships, highlighting the causal link between the variables of climate change, water scarcity, and terrorism. The analysis was supported by a relevant narrative that explained the geography and hydrography of the Lake Chad Basin region (LCB), alongside mapping the main jihadist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Lake Chad region, particularly Boko Haram, on the one hand, by examining their use of water militarisation in areas under their control. On the other hand, the study highlighted regional strategies and the various policies of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) in the areas of water management, climate action, and human security. The Conclusion provides a summary of the findings and outlines the main policy recommendations.

2. Methodology:

The methodology employed in this research is the case study approach, which enables the exploration of complex issues from a wide range of perspectives within their real-world context. It is a research framework that focuses on the in-depth examination of a system within a specific context, using multiple data sources over time. A case study is considered a qualitative methodology; this nature makes it unique insofar as it allows for a more open exploration of the research topic, highlighting contemporary

phenomena in real contexts with unique or typical characteristics (Range, 2024). The study focuses on a triangular process mainly based on the description, explanation, and analysis of Jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and Islamic State, particularly Boko Haram, under the strategy of water weaponization in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB). Especially since the case study adopts a methodological pattern that combines descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory understanding to explain why and how certain sequences of events occur under specific conditions. The methodological framework of the case study is entirely appropriate for environmental terrorism (Harley, 2025), which is considered a strategic warfare employed by jihadist groups in response to climate change and dwindling water resources. It is used as a weapon of war to serve their political and ideological objectives, thereby transforming the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) into a regional insecurity complex.

The study uses a qualitative methodological approach, focusing primarily on process dynamics, context, and change to identify, interpret, and analyze the interactions between environmental risks and terrorist insurgency in the Lake Chad basin. Qualitative research techniques aim to answer the questions 'why' and 'how' and are therefore perfectly suited to this research project (Makateng, 2025). In fact, the study used various types of sources and documents (primary, secondary and tertiary) to illustrate the direct links between variables on the subject, as well as to provide a better understanding of the methodological process that analyses, interprets and evaluates (Ajayi, 2023) the use of water resources as a weapon by African jihadist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and Islamic State in the Lake Chad region. The research was deepened through the examination of official reports, periodicals, essays, and academic writings.

3. Literature Review: Water Security, Terrorism, and Climate Change

Open-source information is an effective methodology that uses publicly available sources to examine fundamental evidence linking climate change and terrorism. Data is collected from freely accessible information sources, public databases, social media, blogs, and specialised news sites (Le Deuff, 2021). Meanwhile, the literature review was compiled primarily through a selective process of mining and exploiting secondary data, with in-depth analysis using key terms in scientific publications and online databases, mainly Google Scholar. The literature review aims to provide an overview of the existing scientific literature on the causal links between climate change, water scarcity (i.e. water security) and terrorism in correlation with the variables that cause terrorism, proposing various explanatory factors to understand the processes that lead to terrorist acts in such circumstances in a framework where certain initial causes (the variables) transmit their causal force and produce their concrete effects "final effects" (Maillet, 2018). Consequently, the literature review corpus is organised and classified by theme, including climate change, water scarcity, and terrorism.

In the postmodern context following the end of the Cold War, the fundamental concepts of international relations have been completely overturned, especially with

the emergence of human security, which prioritizes individuals and communities over traditional militaristic and state-centric approaches. Environmental security has thus become a pivotal concept, with environmental resources, particularly water resources and rivers, being essential to national security (Kaldor, 2006). At the same time, terrorist acts are not limited to the use of military instruments but also target the environment, water resources, oil and energy infrastructure, and even ecosystems, which have become prime targets for non-state armed groups (NSAGs). Thus, environmental resources serve simultaneously as tools and targets of terrorism (Chalecki, 2024).

Both climate change and terrorism significantly threaten contemporary global security. A majority of security studies experts, however, tend to evaluate these critical issues as distinct and unrelated. Nonetheless, the connection and reciprocal influence between these two topics has gained considerable recognition and attention, especially in the last twenty years. Academic research analysing the relationship between climate and security has demonstrated that climate change is a hybrid phenomenon that plays the role of an actor intensifier of threats on the international agenda, amplifying pre-existing challenges and increasing susceptibility to harm (Asaka, 2021). While the analysis of the potential link between climate change and terrorism has not yet been fully recognised at the global policy-making level. In fact, the environmental changes and the exacerbation and unequal distribution of water resources are likely to have an additional impact on security, particularly on the risk of terrorism and the rise of radicalisation, regardless of the types of terrorist groups and their ideological tendencies, namely ethno-nationalist, religiously orientated, and 'extremist' terrorism (Jaworska, 2024).

The connections between terrorism, water security, and climate change are intricate and varied. In unstable and vulnerable regions, the direct and indirect effects of climate change increase the likelihood of terrorism, political instability, migration, and displacement. Climate change also worsens societies' already-existing vulnerabilities. Competition for resources combined with water scarcity exploits climate vulnerabilities, marginalises populations, creates power vacuums, and eventually erodes governance. Furthermore, environmental deterioration creates a climate that is conducive to the emergence of terrorism and acts of violence. Violent extremist groups have taken control of scarce natural resources, contributing to the deterioration of ecosystems and natural capital. In doing so, climate change acts as a threat multiplier, on the one hand, by directly catalyzing threats to human, national, and regional security. On the other hand, it indirectly contributes to the rise of terrorism by creating conditions conducive to the recruitment and empowerment of violent groups, offering them opportunities to thrive and undermining the security capabilities of states (Ari, 2025).

However, many researchers emphasise that there is a relevant causal link between water security, terrorism, and climate change, thus forming a nexus of multidimensional factors. Robyn Eckersley traced the link between climate change and terrorism that

emerged in the environmental security debate of the post-Cold War era. The causal link process is mainly explained through the securitisation of environmental terrorism issues by various political actors, which has become a new concern within critical ecological security at the heart of the field of “critical security studies” (Eckersley, 2008). Jennifer Veilleux & Shlomi Dinar assert that terrorist organisations destabilise governments through violent and coercive acts that include the use of water resources as a target. Water-related terrorism is a widespread method of terrorism in most regions of the world, and hydraulic infrastructures are the preferred target of most terrorist organisations. Moreover, water is an essential resource targeted by terrorists to threaten communities and weaken states, using it as a strategic resource (Veilleux, 2021).

Meanwhile, Andrew Telford explored epistemological claims that establish causal links between climate change, conflict, and terrorism. Thus, climate security is determined by a geographical logic that exacerbates the risks of terrorist violence among populations affected by climate change (Telford, 2023). Michael T. Klare considered the impact of climate change on international security, with water, specifically water scarcity, as a particularly critical factor. Indeed, in many parts of the developing world, water supplies are already inadequate to meet society's needs, and the decline of these resources will lead to widespread hardship, unrest, and conflict. However, this understanding of the centrality of water in the climate change-conflict equation is just as valid as a central variable for assessing the impacts of climate change and dwindling water resources on the rise of terrorist activities and international security (Klare, 2020). Hadžić, Faruk, established a direct link between the impacts of climate change and water scarcity on human security, wars, and terrorism from the theoretical perspective of critical security studies; thus, environmental security and ecological protection are at the centre of the international community's priorities (Hadžić, 2024).

The thematic literature on the causal links and factors, including terrorism, climate change, and water security, reveals significant disparities in the identification of the main determinants that drive the interconnections among these multiple dimensions of environmental terrorism. However, the evaluation of studies analysing causal factors has shown that, although there is a wide range of descriptive, analytical, and empirical publications, no dominant variable can be identified as the explanatory matrix. Environmental terrorism is rather the result of a multidimensional combination of converging factors, interconnected with specific contexts, namely national, regional, and international, within the framework of globalisation. As a result, academic experts and scientific researchers in security, counter-terrorism, and environmental security recognise water as a strategic resource for national security. Consequently, the gap to be addressed is the development of a comprehensive process that systematically quantifies and describes how water is weaponised in the context of transnational terrorism and climate degradation.

Key Literature Review	
Causal Relationship	Citations (Main Literature Review)
Water security, Terrorism, and Climate Change	Haimes, Yacov Y.,2002; Gleick, Peter H., 2006; Copeland, Claudia, and Betsy A. Cody,2007; Eckersley, Robyn,2008; Jones, J. A. A.,2009; Kloos, J., Gebert, N., Rosenfeld, T., & Renaud, F.,2013; Kim, Kyungmee, and Ashok Swain,2017; Kohler, Christina, Carlos Denner Dos Santos, and Marcel Bursztyn,2019; Hadžić, Faruk,2020; Spadaro, Paola Andrea,2020; Telford, Andrew,2020; Asaka, Jeremiah O.,2021; Michel, David, Mats Eriksson, and Martina Klimes,2021; Veilleux, Jennifer, and Shlomi Dinar,2021; Mavrakou, S., Chace-Donahue, E., Oluanaigh, R., & Conroy, M., 2022; Fu, Matt,2023; Kaur, Komalpreet, and Vanina Adoriana Trifan,2023; Ari, İzzet,2025; Stephen Harley,2025.

Figure 1: See the table drawn up by the researcher “Causal Relationship: Water Security, Terrorism, and Climate Change: Key Literature Review”. Source: Author.

4. Lake Chad Basin Region (LCB): Geography and Hydrography

The Lake Chad Basin is an inland drainage system that includes Lake Chad and covers an area of approximately 2,355,000 km² in the eastern part of the Sahel region. The LCB includes portions of Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Libya, Niger, Nigeria, Algeria, and Sudan. The sedimentary formation of the Chad Aquifer (CAF) is of paramount importance and constitutes one of the largest aquifer systems in the world, as it extends the entire basin. Thus, the hydrological dynamics of the Lake Chad basin are closely linked to development, economic productivity, and food security (Vaquero, 2021). Moreover, the Lake Chad basin is the largest endorheic basin in the world, covering approximately 8% of the African continent. Lake Chad is a vital water resource in the semi-arid corridor of the Sahelian and Saharan deserts, on which a population density of over 30 million people depends for their livelihoods (Gao, 2011). Lake Chad is a variable reservoir of water, largely dependent on seasonal fluctuations; it is thus primarily fed by the Chari-Logone river system and the Ebeji (El-Béid) and Yedseram rivers. Given its geographical positioning in the Central-Western African zone, Lake Chad harbours significant biological diversity, and the region's climate is strongly influenced by seasonal migration and the interaction of dry and subsiding continental air masses with a humid and unstable maritime air mass (Gritzner, 2025).



**Figure 2: See the map of the “States, Regions, and Provinces of the Lake Chad Basin”.
United Nations Development Programme UNDP (a), 2022.**

The decrease in Lake Chad between 1963 and 1990 is attributed to human influences, notably the demographic explosion from the 1940s to the 2010s, and climatic effects, with the decrease in precipitation in the Central African Republic (CAR). This is because two important rivers, the Chari and the Logone, originate in the CAR before flowing into Chad and then into Lake Chad, which serves as a reservoir for these waterways. Despite the increased availability of land, the adverse economic effects on key economic sectors such as fishing, agriculture, and livestock farming are significant, with over 6% in the lake region; they reach 9% in Chad, the country most negatively affected. This shock has repercussions that go beyond mere economic losses; it also affects the overall quality of life and resilience of communities that depend on Lake Chad's resources (Yahe, 2024).

Given the size of the population and the geographical context, it is hardly surprising that any modification of the lake's physical characteristics can have significant social consequences. Indeed, the hydrography of Lake Chad is transforming, with a reduction of about 90% since the 1960s. The declining shoreline offers new opportunities for the

proliferation of transnational security threats, including conflicts and armed actors to establish and maintain their grip. Thus, Lake Chad is the backdrop to a complex humanitarian crisis caused by violence, climate change, and the absence of governance in remote regions, and the intersection of a complex security vacuum with violent extremist organisations (VEOs) (Griffin, 2020). The Lake Chad area stands out as one of the most impoverished regions globally, marked by a substantial population increase and risks of severe weather conditions, alongside the impacts of climate change. The susceptibility of this area has been intensified because of its location at the meeting point of climate patterns, cultures, and geopolitical forces between both West and Central Africa and arid and moist regions of Africa, and additionally because its area extends across four nations – Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad – each experiencing unstable sociopolitical developments following their independence. Nevertheless, intra- and inter-community tensions persisted, as did huge social disparities across the Lake Chad region. Climate change, alongside factors such as poverty, social and political conditions, corruption, and state dysfunction, has led to the emergence of radicalisation and the rise of armed jihadist groups, extending their theatre of operations from Nigeria to northern Cameroon, then to Niger and Chad (Magrin, 2018).

5. Jihadist Groups and Water's Weaponization in the Lake Chad Basin

According to Islamic rules, water is considered a vital resource in its religious and economic aspects; thus, the management of water resources has been rationalised based on solidarity and equity. In contrast, jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Lake Chad region, particularly Boko Haram, have adopted a strategy of militarising water to consolidate their power in controlled areas.

5.1 Islamic Water Management: The Fundamental Rules

The Islamic perception of water is based on fundamental principles, namely public and collective ownership of water and its rational use within a religious and cultural framework, in line with local beliefs and the values of their society. Islamic thought considers freshwater resources to be essential in all facets of religious, daily, social, and economic life. Thus, given the vital importance of water and its scarcity, Islam has adopted a code of conduct that prohibits monopoly and waste, classifying them as acts of devotion; hence, the importance of awareness-raising and the role of water education in the religious duties of a good Muslim with civic responsibility in accordance with the spirit of all the principles of the Dublin Statement⁴ (Ali, 2023) considering water as an essential resource for life, with integrated management of this

⁴ The International Conference on Water and the Environment (ICWE) in Dublin, Ireland, held from 26 to 31 January 1992, established the first concerted effort on the 'Dublin Principles' concerning water and sustainable development. The Dublin Declaration is now considered the basis for the reform and the management of the water sector, involving numerous actors, including global governance institutions, transnational corporations, states, and NGOs.

natural asset, horizontal and vertical participation of users, respecting women's rights, and protecting natural ecosystems (JCI (Préf), 1992).

The policies for water resource management in Islam are designed to ensure the maintenance of principles of equity, water conservation, and the obligation to guarantee an adequate amount of water supply for the environment in accordance with the common interest. Indeed, in the Islamic religion, water is considered a vital collective asset and a fundamental human right; this is why Islamic doctrine places particular importance on water management for Muslims and other religious groups, thereby establishing priorities that affect all aspects of daily life. Water should be distributed equitably and sustainably. The absolute priority is to quench humans' thirst, meet the needs of livestock, and irrigate crops. Therefore, Islamic doctrine supports environmental water rights by insisting that all species have the right to water in sufficient quantity and quality to fulfil their needs. Furthermore, sanctions against polluters of water bodies are harmful to water resources (Shore, 2001).

In fact, water occupies a central place in Islam, representing God's authority over all creation as the primordial, primary, and original element of all living beings through divine intervention (DeLong-Bas, 2024). Moreover, water and the natural environment in Islamic culture and religion belong to Allah (God); thus, the Islamic approach to nature and water resource management is theocentric (centred on God). Within the framework of a consensual process based on facilitation and the resolution of water-related conflicts between riparian states of a river basin, emphasis is placed on the equitable use of water resources between upstream and downstream users. As a result, Islamic water management principles (IWMP) are aligned with the principles of international water law (IWLP) (Loodin, 2021). Conversely, jihadist groups in Africa and jihadist franchises of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, especially Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region, have exploited Islamic principles by militarising water resources as a warfare strategy.

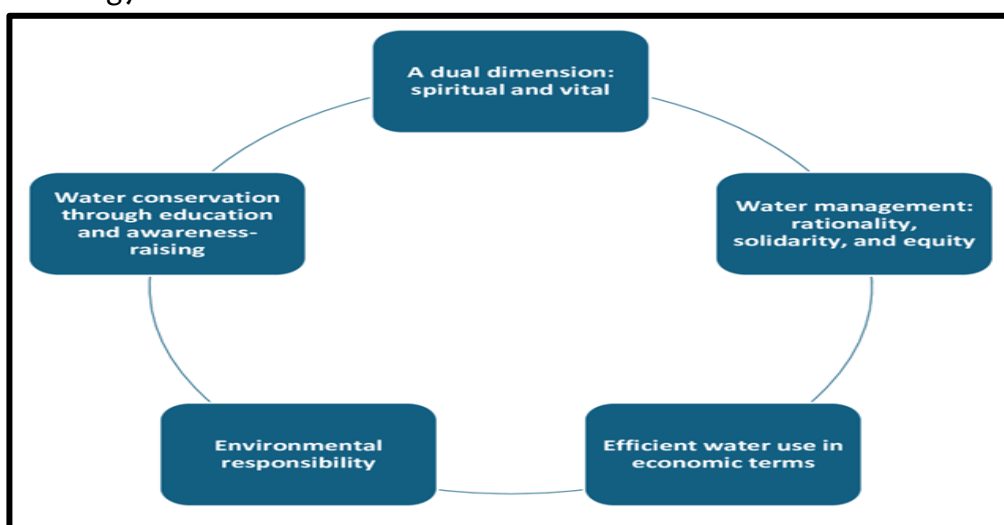


Figure 3: See the diagram drawn up by the researcher. “The Perception of Water Resources in Islam: A Comprehensive Overview”. Source: Author.

5.2 Mapping the Main Jihadist Groups in the Lake Chad Basin

The spread of transnational terrorism in the Chad Basin region is closely linked to climate change; the reduction of grazing routes and competition for land and water resources, in addition to drought and desertification, are fuelled by armed pastoralism, which plays a significant role in the terrorist dynamics led by Boko Haram, constituting the main threat to the countries of the Lake Chad region, previously perceived by Cameroon, the Republic of Niger and Chad as a 'Nigerian problem'. In contrast, the reality of the threat posed by jihadist groups has become a major security dilemma for the African region (Ajala, 2025). The Lake Chad basin has become a haven for rebel groups from neighbouring states. In fact, the lake area historically served as a refuge in the 1990s for the Movement for Development and Democracy (MDD), with its swamps providing an ideal base for protection. Similarly, since the 2000s, Lake Chad has become a sanctuary for non-state armed actors and jihadist movements, primarily Boko Haram. Moreover, the lake's 'swampy labyrinth' in the islands of Boudouma and Kouri, in the state of Kanem-Borno, has long encouraged the emergence of activities related to piracy and looting, later practices of *razzias*⁵ were exploited by all jihadist groups through the transnationalisation of jihadist banditry in the region as part of their cross-border mobility warfare strategy in Nigeria, striking nearest countries such as Chad, Cameroon and Niger, on the one hand by exploiting the lake's resources, on the other hand by imposing taxes on local populations, and also by engaging in the illicit activities of looting livestock and crops (Magrin G. &, 2020).

In the northeastern part of Nigeria, especially in Yobe State, Boko Haram began as just one religious group back in 2002. It was created by Mohamed Yusuf, a preacher who followed Salafism, and he shared extreme thoughts that backed bringing back religion and going back to the true roots of Islam. The size and cruelty of Boko Haram's aggressive acts got much bigger in 2009, when Abubakar Shekau became the leader (Comolli, 2017). However, the Boko Haram security threat has spread outside its initial boundaries and affected the entire Lake Chad region between 2012 and 2013, causing problems in areas including north-eastern Nigeria, northern Cameroon, south-eastern Niger, and south-western Chad. Boko Haram, which is also known as '*Jama'atu Ahl as-Sunnah li-Da'awati wal-Jihad*' (JAS-DJ), was active between 2012 and 2013. Then, '*Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina fi Biladis-Sudan*' (Ansaru) split from Boko Haram in 2012, following alleged disagreements over the indiscriminate killing of civilians (Bulama Bukarti, 2020). Boko Haram has maintained close ties with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), as many Boko Haram fighters participated in the jihad in the Sahel alongside Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Mali in 2012 and 2013 before returning to Nigeria with terrorist expertise in operational knowledge of explosive device

⁵ The term '*razzia*' was borrowed from Arabic. The conceptual polysemy is linked to negative connotations, including violence, cunning, and illicit gain. *Razzia* has often been associated with periods of invasion, involving rapid, surprise attacks to gather intelligence and prepare for conquests, accompanied by looting in enemy territory.

construction, financing, training, and material support (United Nations Security Council, n.d.).

The Salafist-jihadist movements in the Lake Chad basin are structured around the ideology of extremist religious movements that were initially very active in northeastern Nigeria in the 1990s. Ansaru is linked to al-Qaeda. Similarly, the Islamic State entered the Lake Chad theatre when Boko Haram pledged allegiance to IS Central in 2015 and was renamed Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (Karr, 2022). The close ties between jihadist movements in the Lake Chad region have been strengthened by the expansion of *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM) across the Sahara-Sahel (Kapetanovic, 2025), as well as the rise of non-state armed actors in the region under the banner of Islamic State in the Sahel Province (ISSP) (Nsaibia, 2024).

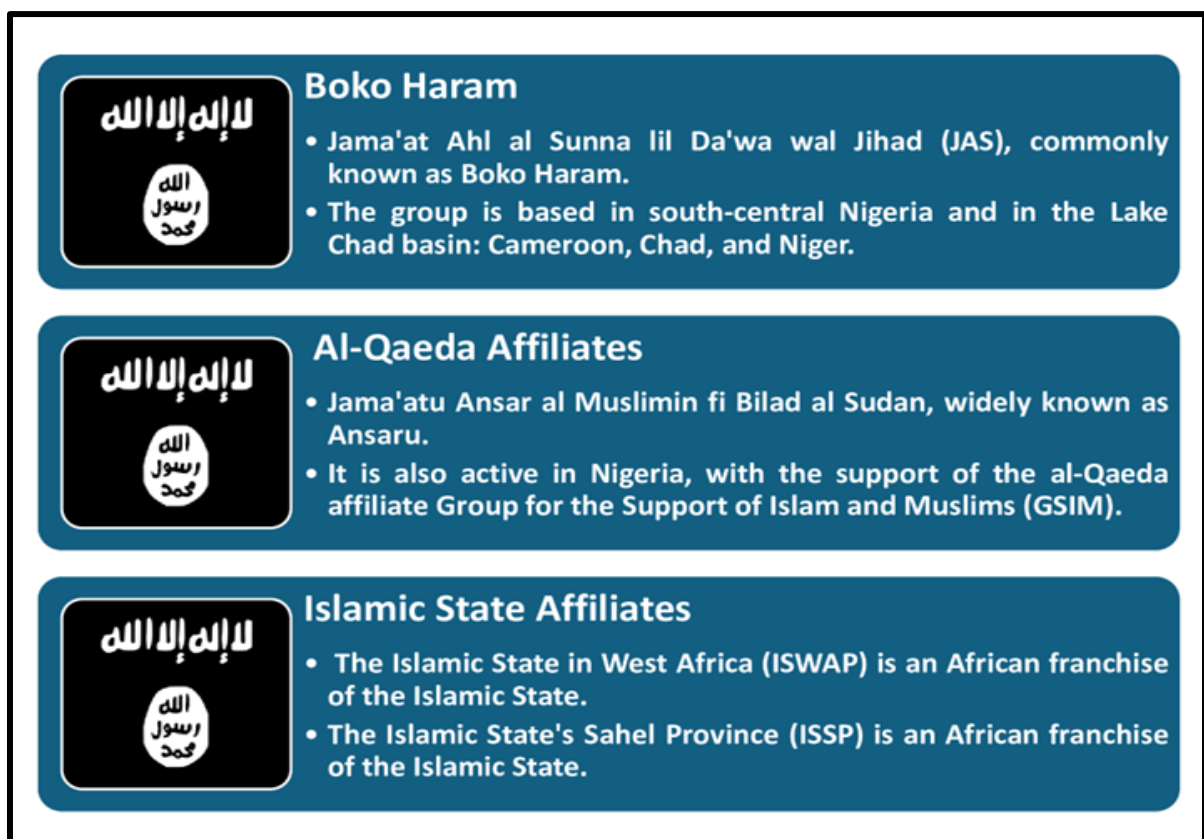


Figure 4: See the diagram drawn up by the researcher. “The Main jihadist Movements in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB)”. Source: Author.

5.3 Jihadist Groups in the Lake Chad Basin: The Militarization of Water Resources

For millennia and in the earliest civilisations, water has been used as a weapon. But in the current conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, and Gaza, the weaponisation of water has

become increasingly visible, particularly through the deliberate targeting of water infrastructure, with consequences for water supply, sanitation, irrigation, and aquatic ecosystems, and serious short- and long-term impacts on environmental and human security. At the same time, the destruction of water sources and the denial of access to drinking water and sanitation are acts condemned by internationally recognised human rights (Sers, 2025). Moreover, water wars have become a postmodern international reality, with numerous hotspots of transboundary water relations evolving into violent conflicts and interstate water wars. But in practice, the weaponisation of water is closely associated with “environmental terrorism” and “hydro-terrorism”. At the same time, intrastate conflicts over domestic water supplies are often triggered by sudden disagreements at the local level (Lopes, 2025). Indeed, the strategic exploitation of water resources by armed groups in the context of conflicts and wars, with water infrastructure—such as dams, rivers, and irrigation systems—becoming a central tool and target in a hybrid model of war governance. As a result, Hydro-Insurgent Groups (HIGs) have weaponised water to assert territorial control, gain legitimacy, and consolidate their transregional and geopolitical ambitions (Mamshai, 2025).

However, the scarcity of water resources is undoubtedly at the root of an increasing number of hybrid conflicts, a factor in war, and a military instrument and objective for state and non-state actors. With this in mind, jihadist groups have resorted to weaponizing water to strengthen their water hegemony and their political and religious power. Indeed, a bellicose hydro-hegemonic strategy has been adopted by the Islamic State in the Syrian conflict (Gama, 2023). Moreover, a relevant understanding of the nature of modern warfare is imperatively linked to the connections between water stress and water geography, which consist of a set of variables related to inadequate water supply, quality, accessibility, and violent political and religious extremism. In fact, the dynamics of these connections revolve around the water cycle and conflicts that produce ‘eco-violence,’ an undeniably recurring reality in water-rich areas in regions at high risk from climate change and the threat of water depletion in Africa and the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Syria, Nigeria, Somalia, and the Lake Chad basin (Volman, 2024).

Water stress in Africa provides a possibility for extremist organisations to wield water as a weapon. Moreover, water acts as an accelerator of violence, both as a means and an objective of war. Thus, water stress induced by climate change and supply shortages in arid and semi-arid areas creates inter-ethnic conflicts, such as the conflict between the semi-nomadic Muslim Fulani tribe and the predominantly Christian farmers of the central belt of Nigeria. With the prohibition of access to grazing lands and a transition zone that is ecologically diverse but increasingly arid between the relatively temperate Niger River delta and the arid northeast, this clearly demonstrates the correlation between water scarcity, environmental changes, conflicts, and terrorism (Werrell, 2017). In fact, there is a cause-and-effect relationship between environmental changes, which have a significant impact on societal development, reflecting the link between security and the environment; on the other hand, it also

has strong ties and complex interconnections between climate change, scarce water resources, and terrorist activities. Nevertheless, the threats posed by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad basin are exacerbated by climate vulnerabilities, the shrinking size of the lake, and above all, the high degree of climate unpredictability of the water cycle. As a result, climate security has become an instrument of political legitimisation used by jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and Islamic State in a multidimensional radicalisation scheme incubated by climate sensitivity and socio-economic factors (Sala, 2023). Although Boko Haram's ideological base is rooted in Salafi jihadism, the group's insurrection operations in the Lake Chad basin increasingly reflect environmental degradation with economic motivations, particularly resource control and illicit trade (Nyelade, 2025).

Climate change has had a considerable impact on the emergence of terrorism in the Lake Chad basin through the recruitment of vulnerable communities and the exploitation of vital resources. In this context, Boko Haram has exacerbated the problem by using this fundamental need for strategic purposes to destroy large or important areas, targets, populations, or infrastructure. Tactical militarisation, on the other hand, is characterised by the use of water against targets of strictly military value on the battlefield. For example, in 2015, jihadists directly poisoned water and damaged existing irrigation infrastructure in areas of Lake Chad where they felt threatened. Coercive weaponry is a mechanism that aims to instill fear in a population or group of civilians. Boko Haram, for example, used this method by throwing corpses and human waste into water wells to announce its presence in the region (Scholar, 2022). Subsequently, environmental insecurity and conflicts in the Lake Chad basin, influenced by violent extremist organisations (VEOs) and local jihadist groups belonging to al-Qaeda and Islamic State, have also resorted to the deliberate contamination of water sources to cause collateral damage to the environment and human populations. Furthermore, water has become an instrument of psychological terror through the use of threats to deny access to or intentionally contaminate water sources to instil fear among non-combatants. This has been accompanied by strategies of extortion or incentivisation in water supply operations to reward the behaviour of subjugated populations and support the legitimacy of the perpetrator (King, 2024).

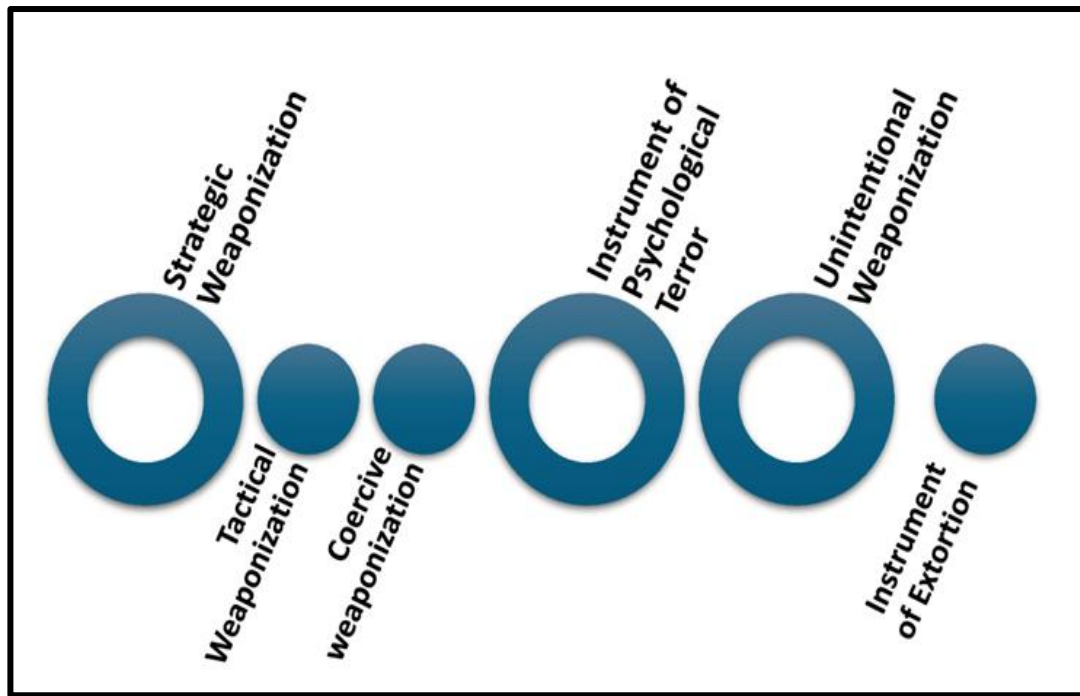


Figure 5: See the diagram drawn up by the researcher. “Jihadist Groups and Water Weaponization: Main Categories”. Source: Author.

5.4 The Consequence of Water Weaponization: a Multifaceted Security Dilemma

The effects of terrorism perpetrated by Boko Haram and various jihadist groups active in the Lake Chad basin pose a serious threat to human, national, and regional security. The intensity of terrorism by jihadist military and paramilitary groups has had disastrous consequences, particularly on economic development, national cohesion, and human rights (Nnam, 2020). More importantly, a transregional challenge has emerged with the volatile nature of insecurity in Lake Chad, providing jihadist groups led by Boko Haram with a sanctuary in a quagmire of “bad neighbourhoods”, with the domino and contagion effect of the nexus between terrorism and crime, followed by ramifications of climate refugees forming a matrix of multiple variables of human insecurity with lasting impacts of increasing complexity of threats and the duration of insecurity and regional instability (Olojo, 2022).

Jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and Islamic State, especially Boko Haram, have caused irreversible and multidimensional impacts by indiscriminately attacking Christians and Muslims, civilians, infrastructure, schools, and public buildings. This chaotic situation has led to a double crisis: on the one hand, a humanitarian crisis with more than 3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). On the other hand, the humanitarian effects of the conflict have exacerbated levels of food insecurity, malnutrition, and health problems. This is why, in 2023, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimated that 11.1 million people in the LCB require immediate humanitarian assistance. In addition, women are

also victims of abduction and recruitment into the insurgency, where they are forced to carry out suicide bombings as a major part of Boko Haram's strategy, thus creating gender inequality and acts of violence, with the Lake Chad countries ranked lowest on the Gender Development Index, Niger and Cameroon ranked 151st, Nigeria 157th, Chad 186th, and Niger 189th globally (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2024). Meanwhile, countries in the Lake Chad basin are experiencing an unprecedented slowdown in the advancement of human development, according to the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) 2025 report. Cameroon, ranked 22nd in Africa with an index of 0.588, ranks only 155th globally. Nigeria, ranked 28th in Africa with an index of 0.560, places it 164th globally, thus classifying it in the category of countries with a medium human development index (HDI). Niger, rated 47th in Africa and 188th globally with an index of 0.419, falls into the category of nations with a poor human development index. Chad, ranked 49th in Africa and 190th globally, comes in second with an index of 0.416 (Belhar, 2025).

6. Regional Strategy of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC): Water Management, Climate Action, and Human Security

The Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC)⁶ was established in 1964 and is one of the oldest African regional institutions dedicated to equitable management of the water resources. Its regional cooperation architecture was redesigned as part of a strategic reorientation (2009-2012)⁷ aimed at better adapting to regional changes and challenges (Magrin G. , 2016). Specifically, Member States undertake to refrain from carrying out water projects that could have an impact on reducing the portion of the Basin subject to jurisdiction in accordance with the status relating to the Development of the Chad Basin, the Niamey Act of 1963, and the subsequent agreement signed in 1964 (Agoro, 1966). Indeed, the LCBC is an intergovernmental organisation with the primary mission of ensuring the effective and efficient use and management of water in the region. It also aims to strengthen security, cooperation, and integration (Abu & Ahmed, 2021) within the framework of Regional Economic Communities (RECs). The primary structural components of the Lake Chad Basin Commission consist of the Summit of the Heads of State and Governments that offers strategic political guidance,

⁶ The Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) was established on 22 May 1964, with its headquarters in N'Djamena, Chad. The founding member states are Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, and other members have joined the organisation, including the Central African Republic (1996) and Libya (2008). The observer members are the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, and Sudan. The main objective of the LCBC is the sustainable and equitable management of Lake Chad and other shared water resources, the preservation of ecosystems, and the promotion of regional integration, peace, and security in the Lake Chad Basin.

⁷ However, it is important to note that significant progress has been made in this regard; the Commission signed an agreement in 1986, paving the way for increased facilitation of the joint economic development of the Lake Chad Basin region.

the Council of Ministers responsible for overseeing and managing the LCBC, the Executive Secretariat tasked with implementing resolutions and composed of the Executive Secretary and various Departments led by the Director General, and the Consultative Committees (Galeazzi, 2017).

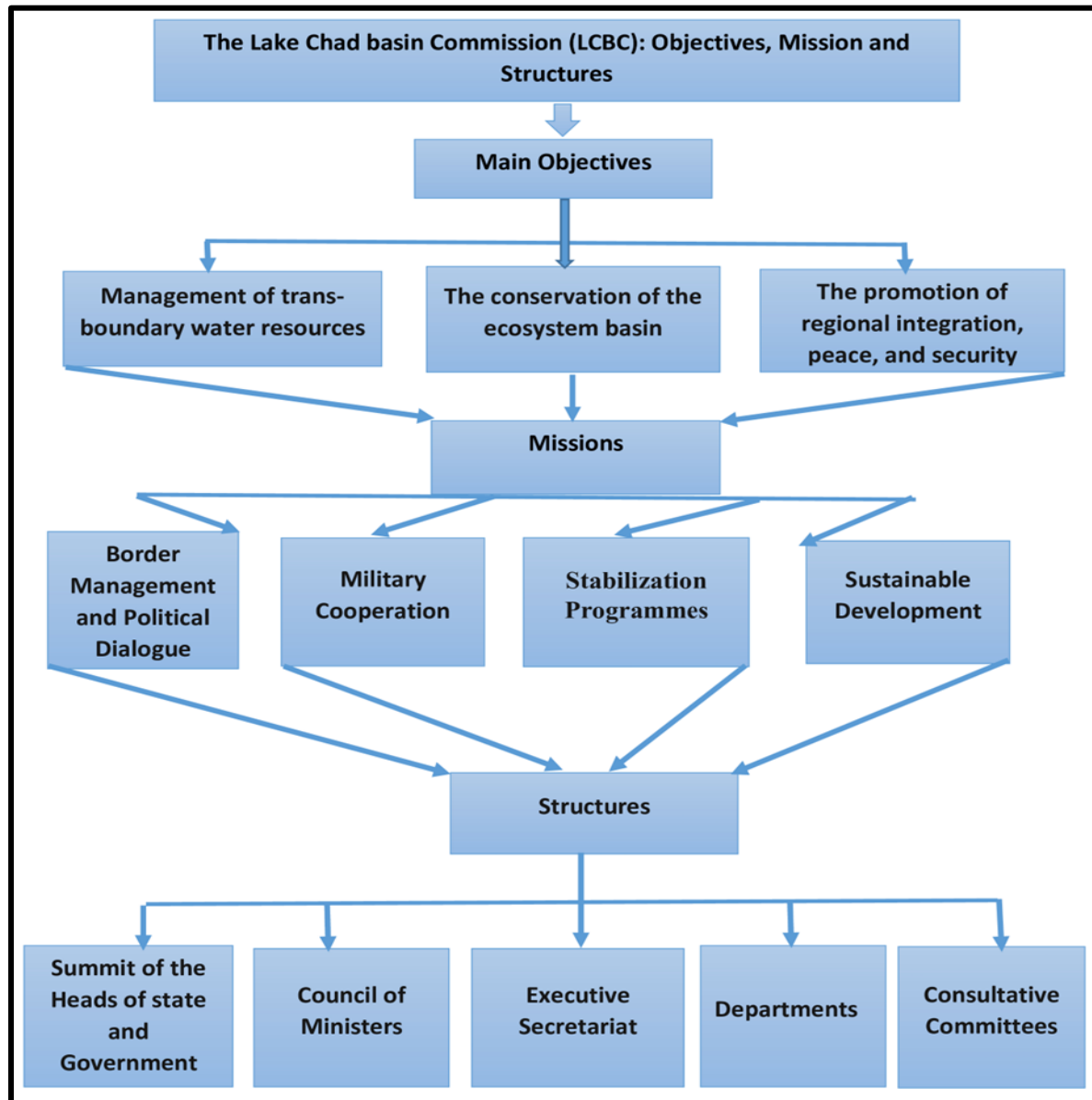


Figure 6: See the diagram drawn up by the researcher. “The Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC): Objectives, Missions and Structures”. Source: Author.

The implementation of integrated water resources management principles (IWRM) in the Lake Chad Basin was institutionalised since the adoption of the water charter in 2012 in accordance with international norms of sustainable development (Mbaigoto, 2023). In doing so, the CLCB countries have developed regulations for water extraction, pollution control, and ecosystem protection, especially within the cross-border strategic framework for disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation

(DRR/CCA) and the Strategic Action Programme (SAP 2023–2037), to address vulnerabilities to climate variability, water scarcity, and environmental degradation (Lake Chad Basin Commission, Integrated water resources management in the lake chad basin (Lcbc), n.d.). Moreover, the LCBC 's approach to peace and security is based on renewed understanding through the promotion of regional cooperation and inclusive governance, while considering the interrelationships between factors of insecurity and the rise of transnational terrorism, which are closely linked to climate change, water scarcity, and state failure. This is why peacebuilding, environment, and socio-economic actions are at the heart of the LCBC's policies under the Regional Strategy for Stabilisation, Recovery, and Resilience (RSS) and the Strategic Action Programme (SAP 2023–2037) (Lake Chad Basin Commission, Peace and security in the lake chad basin, n.d.).

The LCB countries have established comprehensive regional counter-terrorism governance cooperation with enhanced coordination among actors, led by the African Union (AU) and other sub-regional blocs in North Africa, the Sahel, Central Africa, East Africa, and the Horn of Africa. The fight against jihadism in the Lake Chad Basin region is also reshaped within the volatile geopolitical and regional context, including multidimensional actors, socio-economic realities, local communities, humanitarian actors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the private sector, and civil society organisations (CSOs) (United Nations Development Programme UNDP(b), 2022).

The LCBC has been engaged in a hard process of preserving peace and security to address transnational security challenges, cross-border threats, particularly terrorism. In 1998, the Strategic Action Plan was adopted, with the creation of the Multinational Joint Security Force (MJSF), to combat the emergence of local terrorist groups with strong links to the jihadist movement related to Al-Qaeda networks and the Islamic State. In 2014, the CBLT established the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to combat Boko Haram. In 2015, the LCBC was mandated by the African Union to be the political coordinating body for the operation. Counter-terrorism efforts were strengthened by the adoption of the Regional Strategy for Stabilisation, Recovery and Resilience (RSS/RR) of Areas Affected by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin Region (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020).

Simultaneously, the LCBC has developed a comprehensive approach focused on soft and multidimensional mechanisms for the screening, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration of jihadists associated with Boko Haram, in accordance with international standards (Union africaine & CBLT, 2018). With this in mind, the Lake Chad countries, led by Nigeria, have turned to vigilante groups, which play a major role in the fight against terrorism and jihadist groups such as Boko Haram. The LCBC has provided these non-state armed groups (NSAGs) with training programmes that combine practical skills in intelligence, equipment, and instruction on national and international laws on respect for human rights (International Crisis Group, 2017). Indeed, the countries of the Lake Chad Basin region are focused on a non-kinetic counter-terrorism strategy, as a non-military approach that is an effective tool aimed primarily at

minimising vulnerability, violent extremism, and the recruitment of local people who have suffered climate shocks into jihadist enclaves (Aina, 2025).

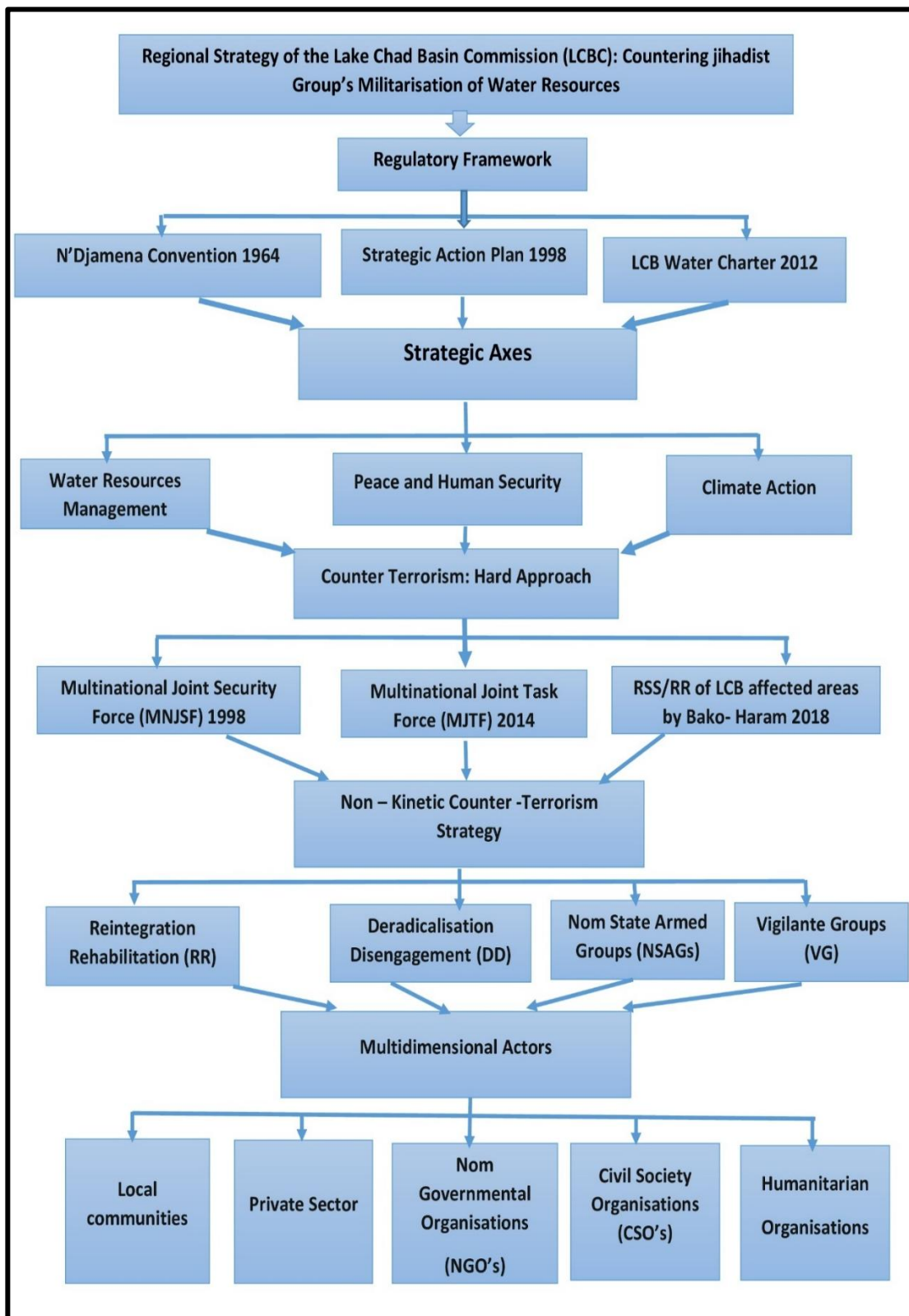


Figure 7: See the diagram drawn up by the researcher. “Regional Strategy of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC): Countering Jihadist Groups’ Militarisation of Water Resources”. Source: Author.

Conclusions

The article highlighted the causal interrelationship between climate change, water insecurity, and the emergence of transnational terrorism, far from simplistic and reductionist explanations, but rather based on an analytical interpretation of a cause-and-effect relationship oriented towards an inclusive and overlapping understanding of hybrid, multidimensional, dynamic, and complex security threats. The Lake Chad basin, with its complex arc of insecurity, has been a case study that has provided an analytical perspective describing the complexity of the security landscape, exacerbated by factors related to climate change that have directly impacted the lake's water security, with a major upheaval in the physical and human geography of the basin, with water becoming a source of conflict, especially with the rise of terrorism in the region.

Environmental terrorism linked to climate change is exacerbating the water shortage crisis in the Lake Chad basin region. This has been a determining factor in the proliferation of water terrorism, which has become a dual political and security issue with its use by jihadist groups active in the region, particularly Boko Haram and affiliates of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, as part of a hybrid warfare strategy based on tactical militarisation, coercion, psychological manipulation and extortion strategies, thus constituting a threat to human, national, regional and international security, with humanitarian crises, food insecurity, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and gender-based violence.

The Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) has implemented a set of enhanced mechanisms for water management, climate action, and human security to counter the militarisation of water resources by jihadist groups. On the one hand, the LCBC has established a hard-line anti-terrorism governance approach based mainly on the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to combat Boko Haram and the Regional Stabilisation, Recovery and Resilience Strategy (RSS/RR). On the other hand, it has developed a soft strategy for preventing radicalisation, focusing on rehabilitation and reintegration with the involvement of non-state actors, humanitarian organisations, and civil society as a whole.

Despite the efforts undertaken by the countries of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), the terrorist threat remains a constant in the regional security matrix, and the militarisation of water resources as an instrument of environmental and water terrorism is de facto a favourite tool of jihadist groups. Thus, anti-terrorism governance policies must be rethought to include the needs of local communities as a proactive resilience mechanism, while placing sustainable development and sustainability at the centre of

counter-terrorism and security policies and emphasising the primacy of peace and security over aspects of militarisation.

Conflict of Interest

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

Notes on Contributor

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Terrorism, Humanitarian Complex, and the Imperative for Early Warning System in Africa¹

Al Chukwuma Okoli², Chika Eucharia Eze³

Abstract:

This paper problematizes terrorism as a complex humanitarian crisis in Africa and makes a case for its mitigation through early warning system/ response. This is significant considering the apparent intractability of terrorism in parts of the continent, and its tendency to defy combat-oriented remediation. The paper posits that understanding terrorism as a complex emergency as well as deploying appropriate early warning mechanisms to forecast and respond to it is necessary to mitigating the threat as well as the humanitarian consequences thereof. The policy implication of this is that counter-terrorism protocols and strategies in Africa should seek to leverage and mainstream potentials for digitally amenable early warning system to make good their efficacy and utility.

Keywords:

Complex Emergency;
Early Warning; Early
Response;
Humanitarian
Complex;
Humanitarian Crisis;
Terrorism.

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Introduction

Africa is currently the world's hub of terrorism. According to Statista (2023), no fewer than 10 million persons have been killed in Africa as a result of terrorism-related incidents. The 2023 Global Terrorism Index (IEP, 2023) reveals that Africa is the new global terrorism destination, with Somalia, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger as its critical hotbeds.

Whilst terrorism has been on rampage in Africa, its humanitarian consequences have also been dire. In effect, terrorism has been a major driver of complex emergencies in Africa (Kiegh & Kalu, 2022). More precisely, it has been a prime precipitator of aggravated humanitarian crisis on the continent. Relevant reports indicate that Africa bears the greatest burden of the contemporary global refugee's crisis, arising principally from the impact of terrorism in different parts of the continent (cf. UNCHR, 2022). The continent also hosts a disproportionate quantum of populations who have been dehumanized and rendered destitute by the impact of such crisis.

Besides human fatalities and displacements, terrorism has been associated with grave socio-economic disruptions. Such disruptions have often led to the collapse of the societal livelihood systems, public utilities, and local economies. Consequently, the affected populations are left with little or no access to safe subsistence, education, health-care, as well as other social and economic opportunities.

The threat impact and import of terrorism alongside its humanitarian complications have been emphasized in the existing scholarship (Kiegh & Kalu, 2022; Okoli & Ngom, 2023). Although terrorism has been widely acknowledged as a veritable cause of complex humanitarian crisis in Africa by a number of studies (OCHA, 2023; Okoli & Ngom, 2023), the place of early warning system in mitigating such crisis remains grossly under-explored. Addressing this important epistemic gap constitutes the major concern of this paper.

Suffice it to note that African Union (AU) operates an early warning mechanism called the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS). Established in 2008 as part of the AU's African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), CEWS is mandated to gather, collate, analyze, and disseminate data on emerging threats to peace and security on the continent in order to enable timely prevention (AU, n.d; Jallow, 2021). Although CEWS was operationalized in the early 2010s, its effectiveness has been undermined by a number of factors relating to warning-response gaps, lack of political will, and challenges of consensus-building within the AU's decision-making mechanisms (Maru, 2017; Jallow, 2021). In effect, the vacuum of effective early warning system in the protocol of conflict mitigation in Africa has persisted, presenting a veritable pretext for an exploratory inquiry such as the present.

Conceptual Premise: Terrorism, Humanitarian Complex/ Crisis, Early Warning System

Three basic concepts form the conceptual thrust of this paper. They are terrorism, humanitarian complex/ crisis, and early warning systems (EWS). This section briefly discusses these concepts in order to situate their meanings and applications in the context of the present discourse. The concept of terrorism is core to the conceptual thrust of the paper, hence the need to begin with it, and deliberately accord it a little more elaboration.

Terrorism is an essentially contested multidimensional concept that is popular for the endless debates about its meaning. Hence, a plethora of intensely debated definitions and typologies of terrorism awash the pages of the global literature on terrorism and counterterrorism (Meisels, 2009). Schmid (2004) who collected 109 definitions of terrorism could not arrive at a grand definition of the concept. Instead, he labelled terrorism as an abstract phenomenon (Schmid, 2004). Coady (2004) acknowledged the existence of over a hundred modern conceptualizations of terrorism, many of which were filled with several contradictions, inconsistencies and shortcomings. Therefore, a clear, unambiguous conceptualization of terrorism that is universally agreed does not exist (Meisels, 2009).

A major reason for the conceptual flux that pervades the definition of terrorism is the fluidity of the term and its alienability to different interpretations which animates the dictum that 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter' (Ganor, 2002, p. 287). Secondly, given its divergent multidimensional nature as an extremely complex global security challenge that involves a great variety of groups with often dissimilar origins and motivations (Bjørge & Andrew, 2018), several scholars are poised to conceptualize terrorism from varying analytical lenses (Prabha, 2000; Ganor, 2002). Despite the conceptual ambiguity on the meaning of terrorism, scholars agree that terrorism is the use of non-conventional violence by state or non-state actors to advance a political or ideological cause. This conception is maintained in this paper.

Humanitarian complex has to do with an outcome in conflict or crisis situation characterized by a complex emergency syndrome. In such a situation, populations experiencing armed violence or conflict are, ipso facto, exposed to concurrent dire existential adversities that threaten their subsistence, health and wellbeing (Okoli 7 Iorter, 2014; Okoli, 2023). Such situations may arise from adverse socio-ecological, socio-economic, and socio-physiological occurrences that are either associated with or results from the mortal complications of an escalated conflict or violence. Predictors of emergency complex include famine, food crisis and insecurity, environmental degradation, disease outbreak and prevalence, mass poverty and livelihood crisis, population displacements, destitution, and other forms of socio-existential vulnerabilities. Humanitarian complex is essentialized by complex emergency, an escalated stage in crisis situation characterized by multiple and converging humanitarian conditions. It is pertinent to not that terrorism is inherently a complex emergency



situation. It often brings about multi-faceted humanitarian consequences that threaten human security and societal sustainability.

Complex emergency is the outcome of a multidimensional humanitarian crisis that is so intractable that it requires a holistic response to address. The United Nations defined it as ‘humanitarian crisis in a country, region, or society where there is a total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict, and which requires an international response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency and/or the ongoing UN country programme. (UNHCR, 2001, paragraph 1). Some defining parameters of a complex humanitarian emergency are acute civilian casualties that necessitate a joint international effort transcending the capacity of a specific agency (USAID, 2000; UNHCR, 2021; 2022). Notable causes of complex emergencies are violent conflicts, war and human-caused ecological disasters that result in the displacement of many people, death, human and material privation that transcend the ability of the state institutions and requires international support in form of aid (UNHCR, 2021, USAID, 2000).

Early warning system (EWS) refers to an integrated mechanism for monitoring, forecasting, predicting, assessing, and communicating hazards in order to prevent or mitigate emergency risks (Oxfam, 2021; Raicon-Pabon et al 2025). It encompasses techniques, institutions, processes, frameworks, and activities designed to stop hazardous situations from materializing into mortal risks and fatal outcomes. A typical EWS works like a cycle which embodies a sequence of activities, namely: surveillance, detection, analysis, prediction, warning communication, and response (de Leon & Borgardi, 2007; Stacey et al, 2025). The essence of EWS is to generate actionable signals designed to influence human behavior towards a certain end. In a specific emergency situation, the signals generated by EWS are expected to elicit a response in a sort of input-output fashion (Kaminska & Bielecki, 2025; Katiyar et al, 2025). In situations of evolving crisis, arising from disaster or grave insecurity, EWS is expected to highlight critical flash-points, fault-lines, as well as situational risk factors in a manner makes for systematic intervention and remediation. It is important to reiterate that an early warning system is made well, not only by the signals it passes on, but more importantly, by the quality of response that it elicits.

A Note on Methodology

This study is an exploratory, qualitative inquiry. It relied on data and information derived from sundry secondary sources, which were synthesized and systematically harnessed into a descriptive discourse. These data/ information were generated from published and unpublished scholarly works, documentary evidence, as well as relevant media and internet sources. Textual and contextual insights derived from the sources formed the substance of the analysis in this paper. The thrust of the analysis is thematically presented in line with the objectives of the study. Essentially, the study was not conceived as an original full-length research paper. Rather, it was designed to be an

argumentative think-piece designed to stimulate and advance scholarly and policy thinking on aspects of the subject matter.

Africa's Terrorism Conundrum: A Complex Humanitarian Syndrome

Complex humanitarian crisis refers to a generalized emergency situation in which an entire community or a region is plunged into dire and life-threatening conditions (OCHA, 2023). Such a situation typically overwhelms the capacity of the affected community or population to mitigate by itself, hence the need for external intervention. Conditions that define complex humanitarian crisis include accentuated poverty and destitution, refugee and internal displacement syndrome, abrupt disruption of social utilities and services, aggravated livelihood crisis, acute food crisis, and sundry socio-economic malaise. One of the critical predictors of complex humanitarian crisis is the inability of the affected population to carry out its normal economic and livelihood activities as well as access basic social services (OCHA, 2023).

In situations of complex emergencies, such as in the instance of terrorism, the affected population is plunged into sudden systematic disruptions which affect the functioning of its social and economic mainstay. This condition of societal disequilibrium flags off dire existential conditions that negate safe and sustainable community life. In such circumstances, too, the capacity of the community to cope with and recover from the associated existential threats is eroded by the mortal vulnerabilities and dysfunction arising from protracted violence and destruction.

The incidence of terrorism in Africa has brought about outcomes that thwart the human security of her populations. This is evidenced in the vicious circles of mortality and other fatal hazards that threaten humanity. A brief empirical narrative would suffice to buttress this standpoint.

According to the 2025 Global Terrorism Index, Africa's Sahel is currently the world's epicentre of terrorism (IEP, 2025). The report also indicates that the region alone accounts for 43% of the global terrorism fatalities (Table 1). Not surprisingly, the report shows that five African countries count among the ten countries most impacted by terrorism. These countries are Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Niger, DR Congo and Mali. Although the rate of terrorism-related deaths across the world fell significantly in 2025, Africa still retains a lead in terms of recorded fatalities, with six of the ten most impacted countries being in the sub-Saharan Africa (IEP, 2025).

Beyond being the world's most 'terrorized', Africa also ranks as the most displaced populations in the world. According to the African Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS, 2023), Africa accounted for 40.3 million of the world's displaced persons as of 2023. Of this displaced population, 77% were classified as internally displaced persons (IDPs), and they mostly live in the African countries of Ethiopia, Sudan, DR Congo, Nigeria, and Somalia..

Rank	Country	Fatality Figures
1	Burkina Faso	846

2	Nigeria	750
3	Niger	703
4	DR Congo	467
5	Mali	341

Figure 1: Terrorism Fatalities in Africa by 2025. Source: Adapted from Global Terrorism Index (IEP, 2025).

The humanitarian situation in Africa as of 2023 has been both alarming and widespread across the continent. This has been associated with a burgeoning vulnerable population in dire need of assistance, rescue, or protection. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2023) estimates that 34.5 million persons in the Sahel are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. Elsewhere in the Horn of Africa, more than 43 million persons are also in critical need of humanitarian attention (UNFPA, 2023).

The needs of these vulnerable populations vary significantly from one context to another. Generally, all the affected populations need food, shelter, medication, education, and sanitation. But beyond these basic needs, the populations often require higher levels of assistance and protection, especially with regard to liberty, identity, citizenship, and dignity.

For instance, the populations being held in ‘captive’ communities by bandits in Nigeria’s North West and North Central Nigeria (Okoli, Aina & Onuoha, 2023) need to be liberated first before any other forms of humanitarian assistance. Also, women and girls among the displaced or captive populations of the volatile areas in Africa require some deliberate measures to protect them from gender-based exploitation and violence, in addition to being provided with emergency humanitarian supplies. Furthermore, populations that have been rendered literally ‘stateless’ by the adversities of terrorism (particularly those in undocumented asylum) need to be reassured of their citizenship.

Essentially, Africa’s terrorism syndrome is, indeed, a complex humanitarian crisis. It has produced and reproduced existential conditions that negate human survival, liberty, dignity, and sustainability. Mitigating such a mortal threat requires taking proactive measures to forestall conditions that precipitate and promote terrorism and violent extremism in the continent. Among other things, this entails investing in early warning technologies, and mainstreaming such potentials in national and regional protocols and regimes of counter-terrorism/ violent extremism. This concern is addressed in some length in the next segment of the paper.

Mitigating Terrorism and Humanitarian Crisis in Africa: The Imperative for Early Warning/ Response

Terrorism is not an abrupt onset crisis. The same goes for the humanitarian crisis that is often associated with it. As a gradual onset crisis, terrorism develops in incremental

phases and stages. In other words, it is something that begins, becomes, and transforms. The transformational dynamics of a terrorism situation cannot be understood in terms of a linear calculus. It is inclined to assume either escalatory or de-escalatory tendencies as it evolves from the stage of incubation to that of aggravation (Okoli, 2023).

At the stage of incubation, the forces of terror are in their nascence. Oftentimes, the forces of terror at their nascence are merely ideational. With time, the fundamental ideas that would materialize into a terrorist agenda are woven around religious or ideological nuances, which are seeking political expression. It is at this critical stage that terrorism becomes, not only a crisis, but also a warfare. Also, it is at that same stage that terrorism begets and becomes a humanitarian crisis.

The implication of the foregoing is that terrorism needs to be understood as a struggle of the hearts and minds that is in desperate search for religious or ideological validation. Countering such struggle must, of necessity, be sufficiently preemptive and proactive in understanding and counteracting both the propagation and legitimization of the system of ideas and ideals that underpin such a struggle. Negating the forces of terror in their nascence, essentially, requires a conscious and deliberate efforts at ideational and ideological de-suasion, which has to be as potent as the terrorist designs it is seeking to negate.

Africa's counter-terrorism experience has betrayed a fundamental strategic flaw. Terrorism has nearly always been seen as a military threat that must be summarily dealt with, using kinetic techniques. This has informed a counter-terrorism approach that is characteristically ad hoc, reactive, statist, and lethargic. The inadequacy of this approach is that it relies on disproportionately militarist operations that aim at liquidating the terrorism. Although it has hardly attained this goal, it has often sparked wholesale violent complications that occur at huge military and civilian costs. This has, in most instances, engendered dire humanitarian consequences. So, beyond failing to mitigate the root causes of terror, counter-terrorism drive in Africa has sometimes inadvertently created conditions for the escalation of terrorist violence. A review of the Boko Haram crisis in Nigeria may help to situate the discourse.

Boko Haram insurgency has been a protracted crisis in northeastern Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad region since late 2000s. It has become one of Africa's deadliest and most intractable armed violence. The violence has been associated with dire humanitarian emergency over the years. The state response to the crisis, consisting largely in military operations, has had some significant impact in degrading the group's territorial control, it has, nonetheless, remained predominantly kinetic and reactive.

Boko Haram is officially known as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad*. The group was founded in the early 2000s in North East Nigeria by Mohammed Yusuf, a Salafist radical cleric. Boko Haram literally translates to Western civilization is forbidden. In effect, the group is ideologically opposed to western education and secular governance.

In 2009, Nigerian government launched a crackdown on the movement, resulting in the killing of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf. Following this incident, the group became



radicalized, escalating its vicious operations under the leadership of Yusuf's successor-Abubakar Shekau (Institute for Security Studies [ISS], 2024a). In 2015 Boko Haram attained an international stature and visibility when it pledged allegiance to ISIS. It also witnessed a major fragmentation arising from conflicting doctrinaire and ideological stance of its lead commanders. The outcome of this schism was the rise of two key factions, namely Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (JAS).

Boko Haram has been associated with massive humanitarian consequences. It has led to no fewer than over 50,000 deaths and 3.2 million human displacement across Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger (ISS, 2024b). Mainstream operational tactics of Boko Haram include suicide bombings, mass abductions targeting schools and religious congregations, and raids on local farming communities. The sect has sustained itself through a variety of strategies, including cattle rustling, localized extortions, and infiltration of local economies through smuggling, trafficking and allied illicit undertakings (ISS, 2024c).

The state's response to Boko Haram violence has been largely militarist. Combat operations coordinated through Nigeria's *Operation Hadin Kai* and the sub-regional Multinational Joint Task Force's (MNJTF) *Operation Lake Sanity* have been the primary intervention mechanisms. Such operations have succeeded in reclaiming territories from the sect. They have also resulted in disrupting some of their cells and syndicates. Nonetheless, the approach has been characterized by a number of structural weaknesses.

Firstly, it has largely been more reactive than preventive. Characteristically, military action tends to have always followed attacks, instead of early signs of mobilization. Despite the existence of the AU's Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) as well as sundry community-based vigilance formations in Nigeria and Cameroon, aimed at gathering early-warning data, requisite early response matched by timely civilian-led interventions have been lacking (ISS, 2024c). Fundamentally, the warning-response gaps have persisted, largely because of lack of political-will and ineffective civil-military coordination.

Secondly, the excessive militarist response has greatly undermined civilian trust in the counterinsurgency operations. There have been allegations of human rights violations and excessive force by the military. This has estranged communities whose goodwill is necessary for strategic intelligence. Boko Haram appears to have capitalized on this gap to infiltrate military's demobilization and operational camps to spy on troop movements and capabilities (ISS, 2025a).

Thirdly, non-kinetic approach has remained grossly under-prioritized. Extant de-radicalization, demobilization and reintegration initiatives, such as *Operation Safe Corridor*, have been largely underfunded. Going forward, a more pragmatic response needs to combine military pressure and civilian-centered preventive measures. Repositioning community-based early warning networks and connecting them directly to decision-making centres is germane. According to the Institute for Security Studies (ISS, 2024c), only 7% of terrorist groups from 1968-2006 were defeated by military

might; 43% ended through civilian-mediated political processes. The continued resilience of Boko Haram, among other things, reflects its pragmatic adaptability but also the inadequacy of a counterterrorism paradigm based on force. Good early warning system alongside civilian protection and political engagement are crucial. Although they are not alternatives to military response, they are necessary complements in that regard.

The Humanitarian crisis associated with Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria's North East is not wholly provoked by the attacks by the terrorists. The over-militarist counterterrorism operations in the region has added to the state of siege and terror in the region. More importantly, it tends to have ignored the crucial socio-structural factors that underpin terrorist tendencies in that context: high level of ideological gullibility arising from the incidence of civic and religious illiteracy; high rate of social vulnerability resulting from the prevalence of rural poverty, unemployment, and destitution; and culture of restiveness associated with the rising youth bulge (Okoli, 2017). Comparative national indices have persistently placed the northern Nigeria as the most backward section of the country, marked by high incidences of poverty and livelihood crisis. The 2025 report of Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2025) indicated that most states in northern Nigeria has a poverty rate below the national average of 63 percent.

Nigerian authorities were either ignorant of, or indifferent to, the earliest signs of an emergent insurgency in the North East. At a point, Boko Haram threat became a subject of politicization by the chronically fractured national political elites and their parochial followers. So, whilst the terrorists aggrandized in their onslaught against the people of the region, the elites and their followers were engaged in the politically charged debate as to whether Boko Haram was a fact or a hoax.

There was also widespread debate as to whether the threat was a mere political propaganda or not. This pattern has also been evidenced from the manner in which the government has responded to the phenomenon of banditry in the North West. The threat was allowed to fester and culminate into a hydra-headed monster before the authorities began to take it seriously. The incremental evolution of banditry in that context in the early 2000s bore palpable signs of an emergent local terrorism. In its gestation period, it manifested variously as herder militancy and mercenarism, which spread gradually to Central Nigeria and beyond. But the state and federal government looked the other way as the trend bolstered.

The counter-terrorism context in the Sahel has generally been problematic. Jihadists are threatening to overrun the region amid the apparent helplessness of its states (Okoli, 2023). The Malian example may also be instructive. The Malian crisis started in 2012. It began with Tuareg's separatist uprising, which was reinforced by al-Qaeda-linked groups (Ba, 2014). The uprising led to the seizure of northern Mali by the allied militants, necessitating French intervention code-named *Operation Serval*. Despite military intervention of the French, and subsequently the UN, United States and Russian, these militants regrouped in the late 2010s, expanding into parts of central Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Ba, 2014).



The Malian situation has assumed new dynamics since 2020s. The country's military junta in power, led by Assimi Goïta, has taken some drastic measures in ostensibly keeping with the prevailing geopolitical exigencies of its times. It has expelled French and UN forces, ceased the 2015 *Algiers Peace Deal* (January, 2024), and exited the ECOWAS platform (January 2025). It has since turned to Russia's Africa Corps for security support (ISSb, 2025). The Malian crisis has, in the main, been orchestrated by *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM), an affiliate of al-Qaeda's in the Sahel. Working closely with its Maçina Liberation Front faction, JNIM launched coordinated onslaught across Mali in April 2024, eliminating the country's defence minister, seizing military bases and attempting to blockade the capital city of Bamako (UNFPA, 2025). The group also attacked several towns in Western Mali in July 2025 in western Mali. Lately, the crisis in Mali has further spread southwards, with JNIM currently controlling Mali's industrial gold frontiers as well as strategic trade routes to Senegal (Reuters, 2025). The Sahel's global infamy for terrorism is largely JNIM's contribution (Okoli, 2023).

Despite more than a decade of French, UN, and Russian intervention, JNIM has become more resilient and audacious. The group currently wields the capacity to conduct complex urban attacks, often using drones (Reuters, 2025). It has also successfully imposed economic blockades in strategic locations. The impact of the *Russian Africa Corps* has been largely restricted to strategic frontiers and urban areas, leaving the hinterlands vulnerable to JNIM's sporadic violence (Reuters, 2025). Also, the tendency to focus on 'liquidating' fighters after episodic attacks implies that the government forces are always behind the combat curve. The offensive launched by JNIM in April 2025 was both massive and shocking (UNFPA, 2025). Yet, it must have involved months of incremental planning, logistics, and coordination. The fact that these moves went undetected and undisrupted meant a failure of proactive and preemptive response- a veritable predictor of effective intelligence and early warning.

Structures of early warning and community vigilance exist in Mali, but they weak and disconnected from centres of decision-making (UNFPA, 2025). The over-militarist operations and reprisals against the militants and their allied communities have fueled popular grievances in some localities. These grievances have been exploited by JNIM to recruit locals into its cause. This has equally presented the group with a pretext to position itself as a defender in rural areas where state's presence and influence are scant.

The crisis of effective early warning mechanism in the context of Malian crisis has been compounded by the Mali's exit from regional mechanisms like ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) and the *Algiers Accord*. So, invariably, the country has ceased to be part of the continental early warning endeavor under the auspices of the AU. The ruling junta in Bamako tends to have concentrated power in the capital, abdicating control of much of the countryside (UNFPA, 2025). Generally, military rule in Mali has failed to restore the needed legitimacy. On the contrary, JNIM has aggrandized in popularity (Reuter, 2025), using local disputes and state abuse to gain support of the populace.

Essentially, Mali's crisis demonstrates the limits of a purely military response to insurgency. JNIM has appeared to be adapting faster than the Malian government owing to the fact that the underlying socio-existential and early warning gaps have largely remained unaddressed. Without a radical shift from reactive to preventive intervention- and a disposition to political engagement- kinetic operations are bound to engender temporary gains at high human and logistical expense.

To say the least, the inability of the Malian government to address the fundamentals of Tuareg's irredentist nationalism in the North led to the near collapse of the Malian state in 2012 (Ba, 2014). The Malian example buttresses the absence or failure of early warning system in counter-terrorism. Successive Malian governments did not only neglect the signs of time with regard to the jihadist pressures in the country, which date back to the preceding decades; they also mismanaged the situation by ignoring predictions and advisories regarding the emerging alignment between the jihadists and the rebels in the northern region. The outcome was 2012 upheaval that plunged the country into a state of acute and complex emergency.

The point being emphasized in the foregoing is that terrorism situations in Africa could have been better addressed if the affected states had deployed effective early warning strategy in mitigating that. In some of those situations, obvious early warning signs were not seen observed after all. Yet in other cases, the principles and standards of early warning and response have been completely ignored or neglected. In some other instances, the manifest early signs of terror have been mismanaged through irresponsible response that bore trappings of either politicization or excessive securitization. This outcome has been common in Nigeria and Niger where the excessively militarized counter-terrorism posture has tended to complicate the fight against the terrorists, bringing about huge humanitarian crisis.

Evolving a robust system of early warning and response is therefore a strategic imperative for counter-terrorism drive in Africa. This is important because it will help in modifying extant counter-terrorism orientation from being unreasonably reactive to being preemptive and proactive. Such an approach will go a long way in ensuring that terrorism situations are not consciously or unconsciously mismanaged, or left to aggravate, in a manner that creates a cycle of complex humanitarian emergency in the civil population.

Conclusion

Terrorism has been a major predictor of complex emergency in Africa. Such an occurrence has been associated with incredible material and human losses in the continent over the years. This paper problematized terrorism as a complex humanitarian crisis in Africa, and makes a case for its mitigation through early warning system. This is significant considering the apparent intractability of terrorism in parts of the continent, and its tendency to defy kinetic remediation.

Addressing the signs and symptoms of terrorism in Africa is strategic. Even more strategic is the task of preempting and preventing the occurrence and impact of



terrorism. If terrorism is a gradual onset phenomenon, so is its humanitarian threat. With proper and effective early warning system, threat of terrorism can be detected in time. And with effective and rapid early response mechanism in place, the threat can be averted or mitigated. Terrorism and the gamut of humanitarian consequences associated with it can be mitigated by institutionalized contingency mechanisms such as the early warning system.

In this paper, it has been posited that understanding terrorism as a complex emergency as well as deploying appropriate early warning techniques to forecast and respond to its humanitarian consequences is a strategic imperative. Although the efforts at mainstreaming early warning/ response systems in counter-terrorism endeavours in Africa have been rudimentary, sustained capacitation and commitment are needed at the continental and sub-continental levels. Going forward, counter-terrorism protocols and strategies in Africa should seek to leverage potentials for structurally amenable early warning system and response to make good their essence and purpose. With sustained and continued collaboration between AU and the United Nations on early warning, Africa is poised to transiting into a security dispensation where response is more proactive than reactive.

Although the purpose of this paper is to situate the strategic place and import of early warning systems and response in the context of the continental counter-terrorism agenda, its discourse has substantively dovetailed into the nuanced nexus of terrorism and complex humanitarian chaos in Africa. Apart from addressing these set objectives, the paper has set agenda for further focused investigations, especially on the need to de-prioritize excessive emphasis on kinetic response to terrorism. Refocusing from the core military impact to humanitarian consequences, but also stressing the imperative of early warning/ response, points to a worthy departure that future studies on the subject area need to foreground.

Conflict of Interest

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

Notes on Contributor

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Security within Insecurity? Unpacking the Complexities of Salafi–Jihādi Extremism, Jihādi Provision and Governance in Southern Africa: Insights from Cabo Delgado¹

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Abstract:

Africa's ungoverned margins are steadily becoming laboratories of rudimentary–proto governance for Salafi–Jihādi groups: from Nigeria's Boko Haram, Somalia's al-Shabaab to Mozambique's Ansar al-Sunna. Although most Salafi–Jihādi groups in the continent have engaged in activities of radicalisation and sporadic terrorism, various nonstate actors are signifying a burgeoning desire for territoriality, jihādi provision and governance. Using Northern Mozambique as a space for epistemological and empirical analysis, this article interrogates the complexities of Salafi–Jihādi extremism in Southern Africa. The analysis situates the trajectories of Africa's most recent Salafi–Jihādi group, Ansar al-Sunna at the fore. Through the conceptual lenses of rebel governance, the paper reveals how colonial legacies, societal exclusions and dispossession create desires for alterity: Salafi–Jihādi led rebelocracy. The paper argues that Salafi–jihādi groups are solidly becoming entities of enormous complexity where sectarianism feeds violent extremism, drives power grabs and rebelocracy. Salafi–Jihādi groups are strategically instrumentalising the “win–hearts and minds” (WHM) modus operandi to acquire ounces of territoriality and control across conflict–ridden localities. The perspective put forward in this article thus is aimed to enrich the current discourse on the nexus between Salafi–Jihādi groups, ungoverned spaces and rebelocracy in Southern Africa.

Keywords:

Ansar al-Sunna;
Northern Mozambique;
Rebelocracy; Jihādi
Governance; Security
within Insecurity.

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Introduction

Perhaps the intricate (in)security dynamics in Mozambique can be best articulated through the maxim that reads: “Africa—the continent of paradoxes and extremes” (Tar, 2021). Or simply, the spread of Salafi–Jihādism in Southern Africa. Cabo Delgado, the northernmost province of Mozambique (see Figure 1 below), has attracted both epistemic and empirical attention for more than a decade for at least two juxtaposing reasons: resource opulence and extremism. First, Mozambique uncovered one of the major deposits of rubies and considerable liquefied natural gas (LNG) reserves in the Montepuez and Rovuma basin during 2009 and 2012, respectively. The discovery of LNG offered a new avenue for development in Mozambique. These discoveries strategically placed Maputo on the global charts of the natural gas industry. Such dynamics resulted in the increased importance of Mozambique's northern coastal province of Cabo Delgado, thereby, attracting some of the world's largest energy companies to invest in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province (Augé, 2020).



Figure 1: Map of Mozambique

Consequently, Maputo experienced significant influxes of foreign direct investments (FDIs) that promised socioeconomic development for ordinary citizens, especially the youth. Such trends ignited hopes for economic prosperity and sustainable development in the Mozambican government and broader society—reversing years of colonial imbalances and postcolonial intraregional inequalities, poverty and strengthening post–conflict reconstruction. At first sight, Cabo Delgado and by extension, Mozambique

seemed fated for a prosperous future with resource discoveries imagined to economically benefit its people, the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO) government and the broader gas sector, globally.

Second, however and counterfactually, Cabo Delgado has been plunged into a complex (in)security crisis that draws from *Islāmic* fundamentalism and extremism since 2015. Inasmuch as Mozambique has been viewed as a ‘post–conflict success story’ for more than 30 years following the general peace accord, the country has always been a vortex of struggle, imbalances and conflict since the 1960s (1964–1974) (1975–1992) and recently (2017–present). The 5th October 2017 marked a new phase of political violence in Northern Mozambique characterised by the proliferation of violent extremism spearheaded by a *Salafi–Jihādi* group, Ansar al-Sunna, colloquially known as *al-Shabaabs* (not to be confused with al-Shabaabs located in Somalia) or *Mashababos* (vernacular). This phase caught Southern Africa, the continent as well as the international community by surprise. Although Ansar al-Sunna has been operating as a sect since the early 2010s, the *Salafi–Jihādi* group gained notoriety after the Mocímboa da Praia assault that claimed several lives. Subsequent to the initial attacks of October the 5th, Ansar al-Sunna has been amplifying its strength, (in)security, and influence. By 2020, merely three years following its emergence as a violent entity, the *jihādi* group executed a minimum of 20 to maximum of 40 sporadic and gruesome attacks per month, targeting public infrastructure, secular officials and ordinary citizens (see Figure 2 below).

Year		Attacks Per Month	Region(s) of Dominance
2009 2017	–	0–5 violent attacks	Mocímboa da Praia District and Palma District Localities: Mitumbate, Maculo and others
2017 2018	–	7–15 violent attacks	Palma District and Mavango District Localities: Olumbi, Chitolo, Monjane and others
2018 2019	–	9–25 violent attacks	Macomia District; Nengade District; Mecúfi District Localities: DiacaVelha, Nathuko, Paqueue and others
2019 2020	–	30–45 violent attacks	Muidumbe District, Mocímboa da Praia District Localities: Xitaxi, Quissanga, Muatide and others

Figure 2: Ansar al–Sunna’s Political Economy of Violence, 2017 –2020.

Eight years on, Ansar al-Sunna has spearheaded more than 2 370 events linked to political violence across localities in Cabo Delgado (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, 2026). While other African governments have been occupied with the recent Ebola outbreak, Maputo is battling with Ansar al-Sunna’s uninterrupted *Salafi–Jihādi* movement. Reports from the United Nations Refugee Agency (2024) show that as of January 2024, over 4 000 people have been killed and 800 000 displaced due to Ansar

al-Sunna's violent extremism. So far, the escalating (in)security in Cabo Delgado disrupted gas projects and developments, delaying potential investments, economic progress and sustainable development. By and large, the synergies between resource discoveries and violent extremism in Cabo Delgado avouch for the dominant scholarly view that Mozambique has fallen into the same trap as with many resource endowed African countries (Pereira, Forquilha & Habibe, 2018; Feijó & Orre, 2024; Bonate, 2024). Policymakers are also in agreement with this vantage point. Liesl Louw-Vaudran, a senior advisor at the African Union, asserted that (BBC News Africa, 2021): *"it's almost uncanny...the time of it...that here we have one of the biggest natural gas finds and then you suddenly have an insurgency. It is exceedingly difficult to not see a link there"*. The timely coincidence of resource discoveries and prospects for economic development with incidences of violent extremism in Cabo Delgado province, sparked the resource–curse debate. It systematically reinforces the burgeoning idea that Cabo Delgado is encountering and living out the realities of “paradoxes and extremes.” Nevertheless, these binaries related to the paradox of the plenty woefully downplay the complex nature of the insecurity crisis in Cabo Delgado (Noor, 2021). Such binaries should not be perceived as the root causes of the ongoing conflict dynamics in Northern Mozambique, but rather as consequences, if not manifestations of frantic-complex-fluid factors at play. All this prompts us to critically ask the following three questions that will guide the execution of this paper:

- Does the Northern Mozambique experience demonstrate the realities of “paradoxes and extremes” within a resource-rich but institutionally fragile country?
- How can we explain the evolving complex dynamics of Salafi–Jihādi extremism to *Salafi–Jihādi* governance in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado region?
- In what ways does societal perceptions of security within (in)security contribute to *Salafi–Jihādi* extremism, *jihādi* governance and counterextremism initiatives?

Researching Africa as a field of violent extremism and terrorism demands methodological tools that have the capacity to unearth the sociology of complex political violence. The research employed a qualitative approach, with the application of process-tracing and critical analytical methods, to investigate the complexities of *Salafi–Jihādi* extremism in Mozambique. Data was drawn from a careful (re)reading of secondary literature to uncover missed causal variables, hidden assumptions, and deconstruct existing information to gain insight on underlying structures and shifting conflict dynamics. The study took a pragmatic approach to select secondary materials based on the following merits: first, Mozambique's history, particularly, the emergence of *Islām* and the pre-and-post Portuguese era; second, the post-independence Mozambican status quo; third, the resource-curse discourse; and lastly, transnationality in Southern Africa. The analysis of the selected secondary literature elucidated both limitations and nuances. Reflecting broadly on the limitations that the study faced in its execution, two issues stood out. First, the limited capacity to analyse literature written in Portuguese restricted the research's potential and ability to bring forth critical issues

raised by northerners. Second, the over-reliance on secondary materials has, inadvertently, steered the research to rehearse some elements of the Anglo-Saxon knowledge. To address these limitations, the author relied on the following scholarly materials (a) local authorities on the subject matter (João Pereira, Salvador Forquilha, Sheikh Saide Habibe, Liazzat Bonate, Tassiana Tomé, to name a few); (b) prominent *Islāmic* clerics (for example, Sheikh Saide Habibe); (c) two dominant databases on political and/or organised violence (the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)). The selected data demonstrated an agreement on Mozambique's colonial continuities, resource abundance or curse, and politics of relative deprivation. However, disconnections around *jihādi* provision and rebelocracy materialised. These *disconnectivities* justifies research that unpack how relative deprivation, transnationality, sectarianism, and rebelocracy intersect. The interest is placed on such nuances.

This review develops its arguments in three sections. The first section relates to the introductory section, as outlined in the preliminary paragraphs. Written with historians, peace and security scholars in mind, the study provides a historical overview of the complexities in Mozambique. The second section is designed to unpack the dynamics of *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism in Southern Africa. It does so by looking at the evolution of Ansar al-Sunna's *jihādi*: from terror to care. The last section interrogates counterextremist initiatives for Mozambique's peace and security. Taken all together, the present paper pays specific attention to the particularities of conflict complexities by evaluating Ansar al-Sunna, and how the *Salafi-Jihādi* group is actively making the familiar narrative of violent extremism, strange (Baaz & Stern, 2016). Before the debate advances any further, it is important that the paper sets out the conceptual and theoretical lens that guides the epistemic inquiry.

Of Rebelocracy? Theorising Salafi-Jihādi Governance

Africa's 21st century (in)security dynamics are rapidly transforming discourses around the political economy of violence: with destruction, diversion and (dis)order as defining features. Violent extremism is becoming a culmination of sectarianism, often militarised to drive terror and *de facto* governance. In fact, Ansar al-Sunna's *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism in Mozambique paints a grim picture of how violence emerges from sectarian extremes that brew into sporadic episodes of terrorism and spark an appetite for rebel governance in localities. While discourses on Mozambique's armed conflict frame the ongoing dynamics as manifestations of terrorism, insurrection or *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism (as with the current paper), a few scholarly works interrogate how the ongoing complex conflict dynamics in Northern Mozambique are shifting from *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism to *Salafi-Jihādi* governance that likens rebel governance.

What describes order during (dis)order? What informs such order? Who spearheads the order? These questions have become the seed that informs scholarship around rebel governance with scholars seeking to understand the phenomenon, dimensions, conditions, as well as typologies. Before the discussion moves forward, let us first

explore the phraseology of rebel governance. Though definitions vary, scholars generally agree that rebel governance describes rebels' efforts, particularly, extremists or *Salafi-Jihādi* groups, to create order during wartime. In this vein, the phraseology defines a complex phenomenon wherein violent non-state actors such as rebels, insurgents or *Salafi-Jihādi* groups occupy ungoverned spaces, establish norms, societal standards, as well as build rudimentary proto-communities during complex political violence. Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly (2015) corroborate this view, arguing that rebel governance, describes strategic actions taken by insurgents or rebels to set up alternative structures within their localities to regulate socio-economic and political spaces during armed conflict.

Rebelocracy, as a fast emerging body of literature, recognises violent nonstate actors beyond the narrative that assumes extremists are sources of insecurity, but as viable alternative governing actors that are capable to set rules and facilitate social cohesion, deliver basic services, build wartime institutions in the face of insecurity and establish societal order in (dis)order (Arjona *et. al.*, 2015; Arjona, 2016; Huang, 2016; Florea, 2020). This means that the phenomenon of rebel governance, occurs when rebels have the incentives to create systems of governance, especially during conflict. Taking a closer look into rebel governance, scholars argue that violent nonstate actors interact with several actors, particularly, the state, businesses and civilians to establish *wartime order* (Arjona, 2016), *wartime political order* (Staniland, 2012) as well as *wartime economic order* (Mampilly & Gutierrez, 2023).

To further outline the basic ideas on rebel political order, three scope conditions should be evident: (1) the threat to use armed force, (2) some degree of territorial control for rebels, and (3) rebel-civilian relations (Kasfir, 2015). Rebel governance paradigm thus focuses on the systematic relations between rebel rulers and the ruled civilians within a rebel-held locality during armed conflict (Pfeifer & Schwab, 2023). Rebel-citizen relations across rebel-held communities are conceptualised and categorised as *rebelocracy* (predominantly coercive), *aliocracy* (limited deference), and *civilocracy* (occasionally in consultation), often resembling nation-states (Arjona, 2016; Bamber & Svensson, 2022). These phraseologies indicate that citizens are the most important stakeholders in rebel-held territories as they define the classification of the rebel-regime type (Arjona, 2017; Liu, 2022). Be as it may, the framework of political unpredictability is instrumentalised in gauging the political certainty, stability and peace of rebel governed territories (Tapscott & Urwin, 2025). Within spaces where rebels have sporadic presence, stability and peace tends to be limited (high unpredictability). While short time horizons of control show aspects of stability (mid-range unpredictability), trajectories where rebels facilitate political transition, stability becomes certain (low unpredictability).

Jihādists, around Africa and elsewhere, are rapidly becoming agents of wartime social order. This builds on and extends rebel governance scholarship with *Salafi-Jihādi* ideology at the fore. This body of work interrogates how ideology shapes rebels' governance, inform social rules, drive practices around enforcement, justice, socio-

political and economic governance as well as the provision of basic services (Raineri, Nagarajan, Albert, Ndiaye & Stoddard, 2025). It is important to note that *jihādi* governance is strategically positioned between the scholarship of rebels and jihādists that rule, set norms, and control territory ungoverned margins. *Jihādi* governance, as such, is an intersectional manifestation of rebel rulers, *jihādists*, governance, and political *Islāmism* (Drevon & Haenni, 2026). Religiously motivated groups are conquering territories where state presence is limited, set rules, and establish parallel forms of social order and governance, often aligning their cause to the enactment of a *jihādi*-proto state (Svensson & Finnbogason, 2020; Lyammouri, 2021; Ahmed, 2024). This typology, as Lia (2015) puts it, constructs a *jihādi*-proto state that is extremely ideological, internationalist, territorially expansive, and irridentist.

Jihādi governance therefore describes the construction of statelike entity that is centred around *al-Salafiyya al-Jihādiyya* ideologies, often with the grand objective of imposing societal order, establish rules and justice system, provide basic services and economy within conflict-ridden territories where state presence is limited. Ahmed (2024) rightly points out that *jihādi* groups exercise ‘rebel governance’ through the process of seizing ungoverned territories, especially within conflict-affected communities with the vision to espouse an extreme politico-religious vision and authority. Parts of the Middle East, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa are already theatres of violent extremist and *jihādi* governance. *Jihādīs*, particularly, al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and affiliates such as al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Ansar al-Sunna, Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), amongst others, are rolling out pockets of *jihādi* governance across the Horn of Africa, the Sahel region, East and West Africa, as well as Southern Africa (Skjelderup, 2020; Raineri, 2020; Rupesinghe, Naghizadeh & Cohen, 2021; Carboni, Nsaibia, Ismail, Serwat & Bofin, 2026).

Similarly to Arjona’s observations that rebel-ruled communities tend to be surprisingly orderly (Arjona, 2016), *jihādīs* insert themselves in spaces of instability during wartime to craft social order through ultra-aggressive behaviour, service provision propaganda, and civilian obedience. These complex *Salafi-Jihādi* dynamics, as this review points out, manifest in a bottom-up manner: from sectarianism, extremism to rebelocracy (Figure 3 drawn by author).

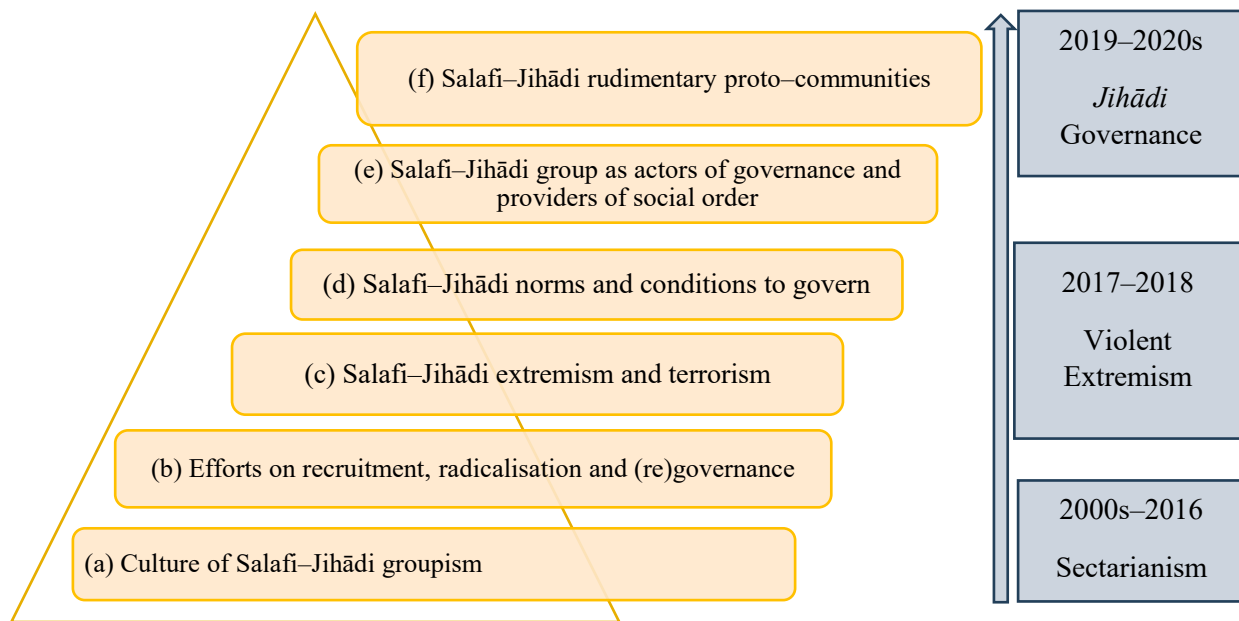


Figure 3: Ansar al-Sunna's Trajectories—From Sectarianism, Extremism to Jihādi Governance.

The diagram above provides a summation of Ansar al-Sunna's evolution: from terror to rule. It is important to take note that evolution dynamics of *Salafi-Jihādi* are significantly complex. Such complex dynamics as Lia (2015) puts it, are intensely ideological, internationalist, territorially expansive and irredentist. Taking a closer look at these complex dynamics, I argue that *Jihādīs* with an appetite to rollout *jihādi* governance start their trajectories with groupism. Ansar al-Sunna, for example, started in Mocímboa da Praia as a sectarian group that connected young *Islāmic* scholars, radical clerics, and supported by petty traders and fisherman who lacked formal education and employment opportunities, a sectarian movement overlooked by the central government (Bukarti & Munasinghe, 2020). I further argue that politics of neglect justifies two interrelated political behaviours: first, the need for sectarian shift towards the reality of radicalisation; and second, the use of military force (*Jihād al-bil-sayf*) as a necessity. Because sectarian groups realise that their *Islāmic* sectarian teachings are not adhered to, *jihādīs* unleash ultra-aggressive behaviour as the next justifiable cause of action (Zicina, 2024). Ansar al-Sunna, for example, tapped into an ultra-aggressive behaviour between 2017–2019, transforming the sect into a sinister *jihādi* group synonymous with insecurity (Bukarti & Munasinghe, 2020; Heyen-Dubé & Rands, 2022). The extremist trajectories, as the figure 1 suggests, alongside massive citizen obedience and limited state response to insecurities, creates an appetite for control and territoriality. Thus, insecurities faced by localities, as will be elaborated further, provide *jihādīs* with relative impunity to operate, undermine the central government and rollout a *Salafi-Jihādi* rebelocracy. *Jihādīs* occupy themselves with welfare provision stratagem to gain supporters, followers, and local legitimacy. Additionally, *Jihādīs* engage within politics of irredentism, while simultaneously ensuring that local legitimacy materialises into *jihādi* governance that corresponds to *Salafi-Jihādi*.

Qureshi (1981) rightly argue that extremists manipulate *Islāmic* ideologies due to pro-military nature, although its tenets are not literal in meaning. Ansar al-Sunna followed suit. The *jihādi* group has not only militarising the Wahhabi doctrine, radical interpretations of Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) and fundamental dogmas of *Salafi–Jihādi* from *tawhīd* [*Allāh*–the Creator, Provider and Lawgiver]; *ḥākimiyya* [divine governance, i.e., politico-religious authority]; *Manhaj* [systematic method of performing deeds, i.e., strategy of terror/of hearts and minds]; *Jihād bil yad* [fighting against evil with action] to *Juhd* [efforts aimed at preventing harm and bringing benefits, i.e., government-in-waiting] but justifies the extremist cause across Cabo Delgado province as a necessary *al-da’awa* [missionary work] (Zicina, 2024, see also Bonney, 2004; Wiktorowicz, 2006; Wagemakers, 2016, 2020; Hafez, 2020; Bonate, 2024).

These characteristics demonstrate that *Salafi–Jihādi* groups operate within politics of glocality. Glocality, as a concept, refers to the interplay between local and global actors and factors (Anand & Pai, 2023). Extremists have globally shared norms and attitudes, but act locally. African *jihādism*, as Raineri *et.al.* (2025) put it, links localism with globalism and governance. Taking a closer look at Mozambique’s transnational *jihādism*, Bonate (2024) rightly points out, that Ansar al-Sunna is engaging within a glocal form of resistance that marries local actors to the global *jihād* agenda that rebels against Western [c]hristian hegemonic order. In his work, Sebastian Elischer, argue that local factors such as state institutions play an important role as “(de)mobiliser and mobiliser” of *Salafi–Jihādi* in Africa (Elischer, 2021), while transnationality and global *jihādism* sustains local actors (Svensson & Nilsson, 2022). This nexus, often observable through local extremists seeking allegiance to *jihādi* groups such as the Islamic State or al-Qaeda, shape the trajectories of *jihādi* groups across the African continent. Glocality, as it appears, is becoming the currency of terrorism and violent extremism where nonstate actors operate locally, oftentimes through *jihādi* governance, but are nourished through a transnational global *jihādi* movement. Parts of the African continent such as the Horn of Africa, the Lake Chad Basin, and the Sahel are already laboratories of *jihādi* glocality (Brigaglia & Iocchi, 2020; Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba, 2022). As a burgeoning phenomenology that marries local issues with global agendas, glocality is becoming a reality in Southern Africa.

Local extremists continue to instrumentalise transnationality with the aim to (a) finance the *Salafi–Jihādi* extremist movement in Cabo Delgado; (b) increase the organisational and military strength and (c) justify *Salafi–Jihādi* extremism, terror and governance through *Qur’ānic* texts. Questioning how has the ideology *al-Salafiyya al-Jihādiyya* influence *jihādis* norms, values systems, resource–distribution policies and *jihādi* provision is an imperative inquiry. As Hegghmmer (2009) notes, however, it is important for researchers to assess beyond ideological doctrines, and analyse strategic goals, operations and behavioural patterns. The following subsections therefore pay particular attention to such intersectionality: questioning how *jihādis* sets norms,



governs and impose societal *glocal* orders in Northern Mozambique where the central government ghosts, neglects and excludes.

Mozambique's Forgotten Cape: A Site for Sectarianism, Extremism or Jihādism?

Beyond politics of (re)construction, peace and post-conflict success story for modern African democracies, Mozambique is facing myriad challenges that have brewed violent extremism. Ansar al-Sunna's movement in Mozambique's northern province should be understood as one operating on frantic complexities. Cabo Delgado has, and continues to, be a theatre of (in)security where Ansar al-Sunna schemes and operates, both as an architect of instability and as an entity of security in the parameters of Cabo Delgado. Questions should be asked about the conditions and catalysts that resulted into the synergies between extremist groups, territoriality and rebel governance and *jihādi* governance across Africa.

This review builds on and expands on the literature that has been set by scholars such as Pirio, Pittelli and Adam (2018); Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira (2019), Armand, Coutts, Vicente and Vilela (2020), Morier-Genoud (2020), Estelle and Darden (2021), Hanlon (2022), Bonate (2024), Guhad (2025), among others, that provide explanatory frameworks which account to the conditions that transformed Cabo Delgado into the most recent *jihādi* extremism site. Three major themes have emerged from this body of literature: first, socioeconomic marginalisation. Second, *jihādism* and radicalism. Third, recruitment, extremism and terrorism. This paper situates its contribution within the broader rebel governance scholarship, particularly, *jihādi* governance, as it is materialising across Southern Africa. This framework allows the debate to shift from treating *jihādis* as merely violence producing entities, but as nonstate actors that challenge central government, undermine State legitimacy and strive for local legitimacy where citizen-care through coercion is placed at the fore. It is important to note that applying this framework restructures the question of what conditions produced Ansar al-Sunna's *jihādi* movement? To what does the *jihādi* group do with the conditions and the ungoverned citizens it encounters? It is noteworthy, however, to understand the systematic patterns that have justified such a political behaviour and the dynamics of social movement in Cabo Delgado.

Thus, the review begins with historiographies. Mozambique's present realities, as with other postcolonial states, reflects colonial legacies and postcolonial continuities (Zicina, 2024). Portugal's colonial presence which can be traced back to the 15th century, however, its efforts for official occupation that spanned between 1895–1913, established an inherently weak administration across occupied territories, now known as Mozambique (Bonate, 2024). These territories were outrightly divided with the object that these trajectories would benefit the colonial State, economically, while governed by *Islāmic* leaders (northern regions), *prazeiros* (central regions), and Western traders (southern region). Thus, the Mozambican society developed through economic-driven

binaries, separated by the Zambezi River until the 1930s (Noor, 2021). While the Southern parts of the country received developmental initiatives, the central and northern regions were often excluded and neglected from major developments. These realities sparked aggression, dissatisfaction and resentment towards the colonial State.

Thus, revolutionary movements broke out with actors, particularly those in Northern Mozambique, seeking independence between the late 1950s to the 1960s. These actions saw the country gaining independence in 1975. Inasmuch as northerners took up arms to pave way for the first Marxist–Leninist government in Southern Africa (Ntaka, 2023), citizens in Northern Mozambique have been the most neglected and excluded by the postcolonial State. One participant argued that *“we are not heard, no one listens to us...we can arrange audience with the supreme, but we do not receive any feedback or whatsoever”* (Lucey & Patel, 2021). These dynamics point to one inference, the FRELIMO government has, wittingly or unwittingly, facilitated postcolonial continuities across its margins that continue to have a profound impact on Mozambique’s society (Rangarirai, Marnani & Rahmat, 2022). A recent observational study, for example, points out that Northern Mozambique’s is among the least developed, most illiterate (67%), healthcare access is at its lowest level (56%), poverty at its highest level (60%), as opposed to the most developed Southern region with the least illiterate levels (13%), healthcare access at its highest (77%), poverty at its lowest (30%) (Zicina, 2024). Regional inequalities traced back to colonial legacies and continuities, together with the exclusionary experiences in relation to unequal distribution of resource wealth, provided extremists entry points for recruitment and avenues for radicalisation [sectarianism], grounds for Sayyid Qutb’s followers to deem the current FRELIMO state illegitimate, encourage actors to engage in *takfirism* [charge of Muslims as unbelievers] and *Jihād* [violent extremism since 2017] to ensure that the movement establishes an Islamic State [*jihādi* governance] where *jihādis* provide security within spaces of (in)security.

Building on the historiographies and socioeconomic conditions that *jihādis* exploit to recruit, radicalise and terrorise, the following review examines conditions that provide *jihādis* with the opportunity to rollout *Salafi–Jihādi* extremism, *jihādi* governance, and politics of glocality.

Politics of Salafi–Jihādi Extremism, Jihādi Governance and Glocality

Fundamentally, areas of limited statehood in Cabo Delgado province creates opportunities for Ansar al-Sunna to challenge the state quo and undermine state legitimacy in numerous ways. First, the *jihādi* group emerged as a sect that was strongly opposed to secularism. Such a worldview propelled Ansar al-Sunna to follow an isolationist approach that advocates for its adherents to detach themselves from the “evil” outside world. This approach has been instrumentalised to achieve three extremes: (i) systematically challenge the legitimacy of the central government in Cabo Delgado; (ii) defy the universality of Western norms and Christian values, undermine post–conflict narratives and compromise the economic development calculus as well as



(iii) setting up new social, political and economic structures that are accordance to traditional *Islām*. Put differently, Ansar al-Sunna harnessed an isolationist approach across Cabo Delgado with the aim that the *Salafi–Jihādi* movement not only renounce secularism and societal universality but sets a scene for a *jihādi* governance that aligns with religious—political authority.

This means that the *jihādi* group's main concerns are far complicated than the straightforward dominant socioeconomic narrative—but are awash with complexities. To ensure that the objective of renouncing secularism and universal norms, enforcing a stricter version of *Shari'ah* law across the region and set up a new socio-political order translates into reality, the *jihādi* group employed societal deviance as a strategy. Contradictory to conventional beliefs about morality, Ansar al-Sunna's *jihādi* likens Émile Durkheim's understanding of social deviance. The *jihādi* group has, and continues to, use media platforms to justify extreme beliefs and political behaviours that diverge from societal norms, oftentimes, disrupting existing status quo. Ansar al-Sunna is advocating for social behaviours that break mainstream Muslim societal rules and replaces these rules with radical subculture (Chang, Turan & Chow, 2014). In Cabo Delgado, for example, the *jihādi* group has defied local *imams*, defaced mosques, encouraged the deregistration of children from secular public schools, discouraged northerners from public hospitals, while setting up madrassas. The *jihādi* group uses social deviance so to establish a governing system of politico-religious authority, that is, *jihādi* governance.

Second, and vehemently opposed to the secular state in Maputo, Ansar al-Sunna has constantly denounced the legitimacy of the central government in southern-Maputo. One of the main reasons the *jihādi* group used a rejectionist approach was and still is the notion that—for a new social and political order to materialise—it was deemed noble to detach from the “evil and corrupt” secular government in Mozambique. This brings us to the quandary of separatism. Indeed, from the early stages of the movement, Ansar al-Sunna centred its *jihādi* on efforts aimed at separating from the secular state. It did so by renouncing the symbolism of secularism. Picking from this point, Ansar al-Sunna dismissed the applicability of the existing secular Mozambican flag in Cabo Delgado—at least to its adherents and apologists. As such, the *jihādi* group established a new black and white *Islāmic* flag, representing loyal northerners. It is without a doubt, therefore, that Southern Africa is confronted by a *jihādi* group that presents with irredentist characteristics, operating in alignment with religious ideologies, particularly, *Salafi–Jihādi*, where transnationality and glocality sustains and multiplies.

Third, as means to undermine the legitimacy of the central government, Ansar al-Sunna has since its militancy, conducted sporadic attacks against the central State. Mutasa and Muchemwa (2021) remind us that the *jihādi* group strategically destroyed government institutions, including administrative and post offices, police stations and public hospitals. Taking notes from these conflict dynamics, it is clear that Ansar al-Sunna's gruesome military efforts towards the State is aimed at crippling the already

limited state presence in Cabo Delgado, especially the State's capacity to carry out political and administrative decisions or exercise the monopoly on the use of military force. In Mocímboa da Praia, for example, headquarters of Police of the Republic Mozambique and border guard company became objects of the *jihādi* group's initial extremist attacks of October, the 5th, 2017 (Bussotti & Coimbra, 2023). Two years later, the *jihādi* group destroyed government administrative buildings, police barracks and lowered national flags, terrorising tourists and multilateral cooperations with the aim to challenge state capacity, legitimacy, political economy as well as seize control in two different occasions: capture of Mocímboa da Praia in 2020 and Palma in 2021 (Van Rentergem, 2022). This implies that areas of poor governance in Cabo Delgado province together with Ansar al-Sunna's military strategies resulted into the central government's inability to maintain control on its territories, thereby, creating room for the *jihādi* group to expand its extremist movement and legitimise its *jihādi* governance.

Although issues of socioeconomic challenges and governmental ineffectiveness have been understood as causes and drivers of insecurity in Mozambique's 'post-conflict' status quo (Ntaka, 2023), we need to appreciate the fact that Ansar al-Sunna's *jihādi* movement is perpetuated by glocality. As with other violent extremist groups in Africa, Ansar al-Sunna has orchestrated armed conflict by marrying local issues with global ideologies to feed into a transnational *Salafi-Jihādi* agenda. Taken all together, these complexities underscore how the *jihādi* group challenges the status quo, undermines secular state's legitimacy, enforce *Islamic* law, strive for territoriality and transnational *Salafi-Jihādi* agenda.

Conspicuously, yet not considered, Ansar al-Sunna's extremist movement in Cabo Delgado has two faces: the first face delineates the *jihādi* group as a faceless evildoer who has been the chief architect of insecurity driving much of the conflict calculus in Cabo Delgado province flourishing against the backdrop of fragile state, issues of historical grievances, areas of limited statehood and poor governance. This has been the dominant narrative in understanding Ansar al-Sunna and the *Islamic* extremist movement in Northern Mozambique (Makonye, 2020; Mutasa & Muchemwa, 2021; Ntaka, 2023).

The second face, often overlooked, describes the *jihādi* group as an *Islamic* governing entity that seeks to fill-in the governance vacuum created by limited state presence, insecurity and humanitarian crisis caused by the *jihādi* group's terror, global pandemic and climate shocks. Into this vacuum enters Ansar al-Sunna. While the *jihādi* group's presence has been sporadic, showing patterns of mid-range unpredictability (Tapscott & Urwin, 2025), it has rolled out pockets of social order, control and legitimacy where coercion is the order of the day. Localities such as Pemba and Mocímboa da Praia have become sites of the *jihādi* group's *jihādi* governance, albeit short. Taken altogether, such complexities and fluidities make answering the question of how Ansar al-Sunna operates and governs challenging in Northern Mozambique (Juma & Sabala, 2023; Harawa, 2024; Waschefort, Phyffer & Bradley, 2024). The next section pays particular attention to the complexities of the matter.

When Faith Turns Political? Inside Ansar al-Sunna's Salafi-Jihādi Governance

Although violent extremism in Africa is still mainly a game of machetes, guns and terror, it is strategically embracing new *modus operandi*, means and tactics. Violent extremist groups across sub-Saharan Africa continue to exploit societal fragmentation and poor governance to radicalise, enforce *Islāmic* laws as well as gain power through violence and soft power. This has been the case with Ansar al-Sunna in Cabo Delgado. It is therefore apt to understand Ansar al-Sunna's new *jihādi* strategy, how the *jihādi* group sustains its extremist project, and lastly, understand the perception of the northerners. Often seen as architects of (in)security, the *jihādi* group has embarked on a new strategy to win the hearts of northerners, positioning itself as a *jihādi* group that strives to rectify observable societal injustices and providers of security.

The new strategy of winning hearts and minds (WHMs) comes after the *jihādi* group witnessed an opportunity in chaos caused by socioeconomic challenges, insecurity and humanitarian crisis in Cabo Delgado. Simultaneously, FRELIMO's authority and legitimacy around Cabo Delgado is crumbling and imploding from within. This reality has created a governance vacuum, or as violent extremists' apologists would put it, an opportunity for the Ansar al-Sunna to strive towards filling-in the governance void, address socioeconomic challenges and present itself as a better alternative. Vines (2020) concurs with this narrative arguing that the *jihādi* group inserted itself into the perceived chaotic social order and portrayed its extremist cause as one that is concerned about the wellbeing of northerners. Drawing from the *jihādi* governance scholarship, Ansar al-Sunna has tapped into the perceived 'chaotic social order' by striving to set religiously charged rules, norms and initiatives aimed at initiating social cohesion, institutions and providing basic services (Arjona *et al.*, 2015; Arjona, 2016; Florea, 2020).

Certainly, the rhetoric that "*the government of the day is unjust... whether people like it or not we are defending Ummah and Islam*" (Stanyard, Nelson, Arde & Rademeyer, 2022), presents the *jihādi* group's extremist movement as one that fights against perceived injustices and strives for human security. It goes without saying thus that Ansar al-Sunna is shifting its violent extremist priorities towards power grab and territoriality. The *jihādi* group is no longer just a violent extremist entity that launches sporadic attacks to citizens. Instead, Ansar al-Sunna continues to capture strategic towns and localities across Cabo Delgado. Thus, it is not surprising to claim that the *jihādi* group is shifting from being the architects of terror to being a *jihādi* government-in-waiting. Areas such as Palma, Mocímboa da Praia, Pemba, Quissanga, Nengade, some of which house LNG reserves, have become safe haven for the group's *jihādi* movement in Northern Mozambique (Bukarti & Munasinghe, 2020; Heyen-Dubé & Rands, 2022). The *jihādi* group occupied local communities across local communities to establish *Salafi-Jihādi* aligned rules, justice practices (although harsh) to ensure *wartime political order*, socioeconomic means and provision of basic services to ensure *wartime economic*

order and *wartime [s]ocial order* (Staniland, 2012; Mampilly & Gutierrez, 2023; Arjona, 2016).

Ansar al-Sunna's strategy of WHMs is aimed at crafting local legitimacy, gain control and territoriality. The *jihādi* group has capitalised on myriad challenges faced by the central government, including the inability to address the politics of exclusion, protect the human security of northerners during times of insecurity and climatic shocks as well as the government's challenges to translate resource discoveries into economic gains. Instead, the government endorsed mining activities and LNG projects in Northern Mozambique in local communities, resulting in several northerners losing their land and livelihoods, especially farmers and fishermen (Ndawana, 2023). These dynamics have been exploited by Ansar al-Sunna for recruitment and legitimacy. To gain credibility and roll out the strategy of WHMs, the *jihādi* group continuously exploited politics of colonial and post-colonial exclusion and attempted to address the mounting food and human insecurity, the declining healthcare and economic opportunities for citizens in Cabo Delgado, while simultaneously, presenting the central government as the common enemy. The subsection below thus expand on this thesis.

To exploit the politics of exclusion, Ansar al-Sunna employed the classical tactic of we-ness. This implies that the *jihādi* group ensured that its extremist departure should be based on setting up collective identity informed by the radical interpretation of *Salafi-Jihādi* ideology. This should be understood as the *jihādīs* stratagem to provide legitimacy to their extremist claims. It is worth noting that such identities construct extremist binaries of "us vs them" or what John M Berger calls in-groups and out-groups (Berger, 2018). Such an othering approach is often used by extremists to establish a sense of shared community, purpose and collective responsibility. This approach is important because with such a communal mindset within a *jihādi* governed locality – emerges massive civilian obedience, followers of the extremist network, and local legitimacy – crucial factors for the sustenance of *jihādi* governance across Cabo Delgado. It is not surprising that Ansar al-Sunna hinged on this approach by constructing a manifesto of "us against them", appealing to frustrated communities who have been feeling excluded (Lucey & Patel, 2022), and ensure that there is massive civilian support and to ensure that *jihādi* governance cause gains legitimacy.

Similarly to the description provided by Gurr's work (1970) in *Why Men Rebel*, Ansar al-Sunna capitalised on northerners' feelings of deprivation, exclusion and marginalisation and aggression towards the central government, to establish radical fundamentalist in-group cells. This in-group strategy did not only translate fantasies of belonging to a reality for adherents but also reinforced a much-needed sense of identity and purpose. Essentially, Ansar al-Sunna provided northerners with the sense of identity and coterie–reinforcing the beliefs that ordinary locals are not only *jihādīs* of injustice and providers of security—but they also belong to a community of a much-needed revolutionary movement in Cabo Delgado. Over and above, the in-group approach taken by the *jihādīs* has given loyal northerners social value, especially when juxtaposing it with the quagmire legacies of exclusion in Cabo Delgado. Operating as a government–

in–waiting and as a humanitarian actor, Ansar al-Sunna focused on issues of displacement, food and human insecurity. This comes after Mozambique experienced adverse climatic conditions including cyclones Idai and Kenneth that resulted into the destruction of infrastructure, exacerbated existing healthcare challenges and food insecurity (Mkuti & Tarusarira, 2025). The welfare provision *modus operandi* against socioeconomic woes present *jihādists* as actors that are concerned about citizens human security and wellbeing, as opposed to the central government.

Ansar al-Sunna has presented itself as legitimate actor, especially with the central government’s ineffectiveness to address the humanitarian crisis in Cabo Delgado. Such dynamics provided fertile grounds for Ansar al-Sunna’s strategy of minds and hearts. If anything, Mozambique’s poor governance served as an impetus for the *jihādi* group to establish madrassas with the strategic aim of sheltering, providing food parcels and medicines to loyal northerners, including the elderly, women and children (Vines, 2020). Another issue that fed into the triumph of the strategy has been the “lean” season. This period, marked by depleting food reserves and below average harvests, aided Ansar al-Sunna’s strategy of WHMs. The *jihādi* group presented itself as a reliable provider of security within insecurity. These dynamics, therefore, makes it not impossible to acknowledge the nexus between instability, food insecurity and *jihādi* groups inserting itself as a source of security. These conflict dynamics demonstrates that Ansar al-Sunna’s *jihād* shifted from terrorism towards the struggle of seeing as a legitimate entity and source of security within security in Northern Mozambique.

Perhaps the rhetoric that “*we [Ansar al-Sunna] occupy towns to show that the government of the day is unfair, it humiliates the poor and give the profit to the bosses*” (Stanyard *et al.*, 2022), narrates a story of how the *jihādi* group exploits socioeconomic challenges and push for an anti-State narrative. Gould, Queface and Lima (2024) tell us that Ansar al-Sunna has capitalised on widespread socioeconomic challenges in Cabo Delgado—including the burgeoning unemployment rates, poverty and limited economic opportunities—to mobilise and push an anti-FRELIMO agenda. This plays against the backdrop of displacements of local villagers to accommodate the LNG projects, resulting in northerners losing not only their land, but the source of livelihoods, especially farmers, carpenters, crafters, boat operators, fishermen and others. All this sparked resentment, frustration and lack of trust towards the incumbent government. Ansar al-Sunna capitalised on this reality. The *jihādi* group portrayed its cause as a just-seeking movement that intends to restore and unlock economic opportunities across localities in Cabo Delgado province.

The *jihādi* group tapped into an economic strategy, offering loyal northerners means to earn a living. It has done so in many ways. First, the *jihādi* group introduced numerous *jihādīs* to clandestine trading networks in an area where there is little, if any formal employment exists. Second, the *jihādi* group seized cash from local banks—and such criminality provided the actors with the leverage to establish a monetary system wherein *jihādīs* and loyal northerners were offered membership allowances or wages (Njelezi, 2022). These strategic actions taken by *jihādi* group reflect Mampilly and

Gutierrez's (2023) *wartime economic order* frame that to cater for vulnerable communities with criminality as a tool for human security. This emulates the security within (in)security dilemma. Third, *jihādi group* financed young businessmen (or loyal northerners) to either start or sustain existing businesses. Because of the regions' economic disparity, Ansar al-Sunna's economic strategy is flourishing. Indeed, the *jihādi* group capitalises on Cabo Delgado's socioeconomic challenges—while portraying itself as a capable and legitimate actor that cares about the wellbeing of northerners, as opposed to Sayyid Qutb's "illegitimate" State framing (Ewi & Louw-Vaudran, 2020, emphasis added). The argument therefore is not how the *jihādi* group has become the cause of instability, but how it has strategically staged itself as a source of human security within Cabo Delgado province.

Principally, Ansar al-Sunna's new strategy of hearts and the *jihādi* governance model, characterised by the advancement for human security within Cabo Delgado, emulates elements of messianic politics, as seen elsewhere (Rapoport, 1988; Springzak, 1998; Pirio *et al.*, 2021). The *jihādi* group has pitched its extremist movement across the region as a much-needed divine intervention that aimed at ushering a new era of politico-religious authority. This explains why the *Salafi-Jihādi* ideology, present histories and Mozambique's status quo have been instrumental in this regard—so that the *jihādi* group portrays itself as saviour for several northerners—from social, political to economic fronts. The understanding is that beyond gaining local legitimacy and control, Ansar al-Sunna sought to be viewed as a divine figure that redeem northerners from poverty, socioeconomic woes and societal insecurity. This explains why the *jihādi* group over – capitalised on the ideologies of *al-Salafiyya al-Jihādiyya* for the cultivation of, and promotion for, violent extremist in Cabo Delgado. Abdo and Brown (2016) attribute these dynamics to the rising negative wave of religious democratization in Africa. *Salafi-Jihādi* groups, as it appears, are using religious tenets to compete for rebel legitimacy, control, and territoriality. Examples of this abound. These include *Salafi-Jihādi* groups located around the Middle East, Nigeria, Somalia and most recently, Mozambique.

Most of the aforementioned analyses, especially the political economy of violence and the *jihādi* group's efforts towards rebelocracy in Cabo Delgado, materialised due to complexities. These include but are not limited to complexities of present histories of exclusion, the extremist interpretation of *Salafi-Jihādi* ideology, the government's limited state presence and glocality. This paper holds that where feelings of exclusion and marginalisation, colonial histories, and transnationality appear to shape the status quo, such feelings tend to become impetus for social movements, let alone a *Salafi-Jihādi* movement that justifies extremism and *jihādi* governance. Cabo Delgado teaches us four issues: (1) colonial continuities that inform domestic politics; (2) governmental ineffectiveness; (3) religious radicalisation and (4) *glocality* produce fertile grounds for *jihādi* groups to search for control, local legitimacy and territoriality—to an extent that establishing a *jihādi* governance becomes an attainable objective. These realities are significantly alarming. Questioning what sustains such is crucial. Thus, the following subsection, delves on this issue.

Of God, Guns or Greed? Tracking Ansar al-Sunna's Sustenance in Cabo Delgado

It is puzzling however, given the military presence of foreign counterextremist forces such as Dyck Advisory Group, Wagner Group as well as the Rwandan forces, *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism, instability and *jihādi* governance lives through an uninterrupted proliferation. Questions have been asked and reformulated about the *jihādi* group's sustenance in Cabo Delgado (Chingotuane, Hendricks, van Nieuwkerk & Sidumo, 2020; Makanda, 2023). Three factors stood out. First, organised criminality. Second, cross-border relations. Third, *Islāmic* militancy. These factors have unwittingly aided the *jihādi* group's organisational growth and military resilience. Mozambique's northernmost province is notoriously known for organised criminality (Wannenburger, 2006). This reality has been, and continues to be, the oxygen for Ansar al-Sunna's *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism. Mozambique's *jihādi* group participates within the black market such as illicit trade of ivory, charcoal and timber, to not only increase the revenue streams and its coffers, but fund the resilience and growth of *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism in Cabo Delgado. Thus, links between organised criminality and violent extremism do exist.

Another factor has been the issue of cross-border relations. Ansar al-Sunna leaders have strong *Salafi-Jihādi* ties to societies in Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Congo and Saudi Arabia. This has been particularly evident through the *Islāmic* student exchange program that saw several northerners sent to study Wahhabism abroad. Some joined the ranks of Ansar al-Sunna from other parts of Africa and the middle east. One interviewee argued that *"every day, many young people from other countries come to join this group called al-Shabaab...no one knows exactly where they come from, but one thing is certain they are not from here (...) they are individuals with some experience of war..."* (Habib, Forquilha & Pereira, 2019). This goes to show that cross-border relations across the northern provinces of Mozambique have aided Ansar al-Sunna's organisational growth and *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism. Furthermore, the *jihādi* group's allegiance to the *Islāmic* State of Iraq and Syria changed the extremist calculus of Ansar al-Sunna altogether. Such developments resulted into the *jihādi* group gaining tactical confidence, finer equipment and intensifying acts of terror across the localities of northern Mozambique (Bonate, Isreal & Rosario, 2024). Unquestionably, the aforesaid dynamics have abetted Ansar al-Sunna's extremist movement across the region.

Much has been written about the origins, the ideologies and the nature of Ansar al-Sunna (Mutasa & Muchemwa, 2021; Bonate *et al.*, 2024). Recently, the debate has shifted towards the *jihādi* group's efforts to gain legitimacy and territoriality. Yet, the voices of those that lived to experience the (in)security of Ansar al-Sunna's *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism are often concealed. Some observers are convinced that the (in)security crisis has been a "story of a drama that is little talked about" (Signifreidi, 2020), especially the narratives of northerners' in areas of security within (in)security. The next section explores accounts of northerners' experiences.

Ansar al-Sunna's Sectarianism, Extremism and Jihādi Governance

This section draws from and builds on established lines of inquiry by scholars such as Habibe *et al.* (2019), Pirio, Pittelli and Adam (2021), Patel (2021), Bonate *et. al* (2024), Feniassse and Mari (2024), Bonate (2024), amongst others, to understand how the ongoing complex dynamics unfolding across northern Mozambique are viewed and understood by local communities that have been subject to Ansar al-Sunna's *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism. Rather than relying on accounts that prioritise security implications to the State, this body of scholarship constitutes a decisive corrective towards security architecture. The subsection thus adopts a bottom-up approach to learn and (re)learn origins, dynamics of *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism, and *jihādi* governance through lens of those that lived to experience the seasons of terror and care.

Northerners, as it appears, especially the conservative local Muslims and broader society, consider the *jihādi* group as protagonist and apostates of the (in)securities. Ansar al-Sunna's extremism has been described as movement that resembles a "third war" (Bonate *et al.*, 2024). This means that the northerners viewed and continue to understand the conflictual dynamics in Cabo Delgado through Carl von Clausewitz's lenses of paradoxical trinity wherein war involves: the actors, citizens and the State. Some northerners have rejected such linearity, arguing that Ansar al-Sunna's extremism resembles some kind of "genocide" (Pirio, Pittelli & Adam, 2021). This paints a grim picture that ordinary citizens across northern Mozambique understands the ongoing dynamics from the vantage point of 'ethnic cleansing'. This comes after the patterns of the *jihādi* group—that targeted certain communities militarily, especially those it deemed *kafir* or *un-Islāmic*. These conflictual dynamics established and continue to brew a culture of fear in Cabo Delgado province. About one-third (32%) of Mozambicans expressed that they fear the *jihādi* group's extremism (Patel, 2021). Some have mentioned the unpredictability of Ansar al-Sunna. Such realities have kept most of northerners fearing the known-unknown within their localities. The sporadic culture insinuates that the form of *jihādi* governance that Ansar al-Sunna is engaging in across Northern Mozambique has not matured into the phase of rebelocracy (Arjona, 2016), but show aspects of *aliocracy* that overlaps with the ultra-aggressive behaviours wherein *jihādīs* hold minimal rule across held-territories.

Insofar as the communities across northern Mozambique are on tenterhooks regarding Ansar al-Sunna's extremism, they also experience untold anxieties due to the uncertainty surrounding the timing of the *jihādi* group's terror. In actual fact, a northerner shared how they "are living in [constant] fear in the villages because at night they [Ansar al-Sunna] come to create terror and often end up taking or [killing] families" (Habibe *et.al*, 2019). Yet, despite the burgeoning culture of fear among communities, some northerners have been cheering on Ansar al-Sunna's presence. Others, particularly the youth, have been convinced that the *jihādīs* "came with good religion, and they [Ansar al-Sunna] are also taking good care of us" (Feniassse & Mari, 2024). Arguably, some northerners have been appreciative of Ansar al-Sunna and *jihādi* governance

efforts, with others applauding its initiatives (Ebrahim, 2020). This comes after the *jihādi* group employed the strategy of WHMs towards loyal northerners – a strategy that emulates aspects of *jihādi* governance where nonstate actors regulate socioeconomic and political spaces within self-proclaimed territories across Cabo Delgado such as Pemba or Mocímboa da Praia.

There are two dominant camps here. One camp understands Ansar al-Sunna as threat to peace and security across Mozambique's northernly provinces. Here, the *jihādi* group is viewed as the architect of terror—actively engaging in some form of 'genocide' targeting certain communities across northern Mozambique, especially Christians and some Muslims. The other camp is strongly convinced that Ansar al-Sunna is an entity that not only educates Muslims the "good religion" but seeks to improve their livelihoods. Here, *jihādi* group is viewed as an alternative governing body. This is against the backdrop of the strategy of WHMs, especially the fact that the *jihādi* group has avoided harm against civilians, presented itself as a humanitarian entity following the climatic disasters of 2019/2020, providing citizens with essential food, medicine, as well as start-up capital for businesses. These initiatives have not only camouflaged the terrors of the *jihādi* group but reinforced the phantoms of security within insecurity and *jihādi* governance.

All this brings us to revert to the three critical questions: (i) does the Mozambican (in)security crisis demonstrate the realities of paradoxes and extremes within a resource-rich but institutionally fragile country? (ii) or do the complex conflict dynamics in Cabo Delgado brings to light the burgeoning desires for legitimacy, territoriality and politico-religious authority among *Salafi-Jihādi* groups in Africa? (iii) If so, what kind of counterextremism initiatives should the government employ to ensure that Mozambique returns to being a "post-conflict success story" or a beacon of hope in Southern Africa, as far as peace and security is concerned? This paper recommends three counterextremist strategies in Northern Mozambique, see below.

Where to? Towards Countering Islamist Violent Extremism in Cabo Delgado

Out of 70 countries recorded as battling *Salafi-Jihādi* movements, the Mozambican government has constantly been placed among the top 20 governments facing the precarity of *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023). Violent extremism across African borders continues to live through an uninterrupted escalation of terror. Recorded events linked to *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism in Africa have increased to an astounding 17-fold since 2009 (Bacon & Warner, 2021). It goes with saying that Northern Mozambique has fallen into the *Salafi-Jihādi* extremist trap that requires escape tactics. The paper makes three important recommendations as to how Mozambique could restore peace, stability and development.

First, good governance and resource wealth distributions. Mozambique should adopt a turnaround counter violent extremism (CVE) strategy based on the principles of good governance that can feed into forward-looking strategies that could curb the

malfeasance of transboundary glocal conflicts such as *Salafi–Jihādi* extremism in Mozambique. Another necessary prerequisite for sustainable peace is to consider ways that strive for dismantling colonial continuities and strive towards equal resource wealth distribution. It is significant that Mozambique dismantles political, economic and societal exclusions because such ostracism funds the justice-seeking extremist movement in Cabo Delgado (Zicina, 2024).

Second, people-centred strategy. Thus, the central government should ensure that it adopts a strategy of people, by people, for the people. The paper argues that it is significantly important for the Mozambican government to explore people-centred CVE initiatives. As Gwinyayi (2022) rightly argues, a ‘whole-of-society’ approach that incorporates affected communities to mitigate potential (re)radicalisation and establish pathways for societal resilience is a much need strategy in bringing about sustainable peace. Building on the abovementioned account, this review recommends that the government adopt ‘two-way’ engagements where citizens’ voices are taken into consideration. It is important that CVE initiatives create an inclusive space for stakeholders involved, especially the youth and women. This strategy encourages CVE measures to steer towards peaceful initiatives that are not only evidence-driven but reflect local challenges (Basedau, 2026). The approach should not only craft frameworks that prioritise youth opportunities, but finance citizen-development initiatives that can feed into job and skills creation for northerners. Funding youth initiatives could create economic opportunities for northerners and reduce grounds for recruitment, radicalisation and *Islāmic* fundamentalism.

Third, the securitisation of non-traditional security threats. *Salafi–Jihādi* extremism and glocality continues to threaten human security, challenge State presence, capacity and legitimacy in Cabo Delgado enabling *jihādi* groups such as Ansar al-Sunna to thrive, sustain the movement, become more irredentist while aligning their extremist cause to transnationality. The paper argues that it necessary for central governments to securitise non-traditional security threats such as *Salafi–Jihādi* ideologies, climate change, global pandemics, as they prove to be an existential threat to referent objects, including civilian settlement, institutional and security force functionality, as well as border stability (Caballero-Anthony, 2008; Sharma, 2026). Taking a closer look on securitising *Salafi–Jihādi* ideology, Basedau (2026) provide policymakers with an integrated four-tier strategy to counter-*jihādism*: (1) joint strategic partnerships, (2) awareness to localities at risk, (3) evidence based policy, and (4) implementation of policy that reduces motivation for a *Salafi–Jihādi* movement. Countering religious indoctrination is crucial for curbing the proliferating *Salafi–Jihādism* in Northern Mozambique. Thus, addressing religious coexistence would reduce the level of extremist recruitment, radicalisation, religious extremism and social behaviours that mimic terrorism.

Conclusion

The above discussion brings four important issues to the fore. First, the resource-curse debate. Evidence demonstrates, to a certain extent, synergies between resource



discoveries and violent extremism exists. It is undeniably clear that politics of exclusion on resource wealth distribution sparked feelings of resentment, anger towards the government and justified revolt. This paper does not debunk the dominant discourse around paradoxes and extremes; however, it argues that the conflict dynamics in Northern Mozambique owe to frantic factors where the intersectionality of history, society, religion, ideology, politics, economics to transnationality plays a crucial role. These complex factors tend to overlap, producing (in)security as a reality.

Second, ungoverned spaces are becoming testing grounds for the *Khilāfah* (Caliphate). Areas with limited state presence in Northern Mozambique generated opportunities for *jihādi* governance for the *jihādi* group. This inference comes after the research findings demonstrate that poor governance coupled with insecurity and non-traditional security threats such as climate shocks creates grounds for *jihādi* groups to stage their cause as a people-centred movement. *Salafi-Jihādi* groups in Africa are strategically tapping into existing grievances, governance ills and the political economy of violence to drive a burgeoning 21st century extremist agenda: *Salafi-Jihādi* governance. Extremism, as Southern Africa reveals, is becoming more ideologically charged, governance driven, and extremely territory oriented.

Third, the complexities and fluidities associated with studying *Salafi-Jihādi* groups in Africa. Ansar al-Sunna in Northern Mozambique offers a template of complexities and how sectarian groups in Africa evolve to violent entities that compete for legitimacy, territoriality and control. This shift is often influenced by the glocal nature of *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism. Four, perceptions differ on Ansar al-Sunna: while the State, regional and the international community views the *jihādi* group as a terrorist entity, some northerners understand the *jihādi* group as an alternative governing body that provides security within an environment engulfed by insecurity. Findings reveal that the youthful population have considered the *jihādi* group as a legitimate entity that brings “good religion”, while others are cognisant of the fact that the *jihādi* group brings nothing other than “genocidal realities” across Southern Africa.

What should be done with these realities? CVE initiatives should be people-centered and consider intersectionality: where approaches prioritise dismantling colonial continuities, establish development-oriented programmes, facilitate social cohesion, deradicalise and craft a culture of religious tolerance. Finally, the paper argues that there exists an epistemic need for research that explores the complexities of *Salafi-Jihādi* sectarianism, violent extremism and rebelocracy. Little is understood about, *jihād* norms, laws and governing systems in warzones.

Conflict of Interest

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

Notes on Contributor

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Between Embassy Protocol and State Security: Egyptian Diplomats in Budapest through Hungarian Archival Files (1958–1960)¹

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Abstract:

This article translates and analyses Hungarian state security records concerning two Egyptian diplomats posted in Budapest during the late 1950s and early 1960s: Osman Fawzi and Hassan Maher. The documents preserve the daily mechanics of Cold War contact, including protocol visits, private meetings, requests for legislation, and commentary on third states, while reframing such interactions as objects of risk assessment and operational opportunity. Rather than treating the archive as a transparent window, the study reads it as institutional writing that produces judgments and prescribes tactics, enabling a reconstruction of how ambiguity was managed rather than eliminated. By following the sequence of meetings and requests recorded in the files, the article shows how Egyptian–Hungarian relations could be advanced or obstructed through individual personality, internal discipline in Cairo, and the host state’s calibrated approach to sustained contact. At the same time, we must emphasize that all the characters of these episodes remained loyal to one’s native country, no defection occurred.

Keywords:

Egypt; Hungary; Cold War; Diplomacy; Intelligence History.

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Introduction

Cold War histories of Africa and the Middle East often focus on visible alignments, high-profile crises, and the rhetorical structure of blocs. The archival record examined here highlights a different scale: controlled access, impression management, and the micro-negotiations that occur within protocol offices, private apartments, and social spaces where diplomacy, rumour, and intelligence suspicion intersect. This article presents a translation based on reconstruction of two such episodes in Egyptian–Hungarian relations, centered on the Budapest postings of Osman Fawzi and Hassan Maher, and based on Hungarian state-security documentation preserved in the *Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára* (ÁBTL). The main sources are Hungarian state-security files cited in the source text: ÁBTL, fond 3.2.4, dossier K-440 (Osman Fawzi) and dossier K-910/T (Hassan Maher). These include summaries, reports, memoranda, and proposals written by officers and named interlocutors associated with the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including its Protocol Department. As the archival material is referenced at the level of specific report titles, dates, and page ranges in the original notes, the article keeps archival citations as footnotes embedded in the text in a consistent historical style.

The argument remains deliberately restrained. These files do not provide omniscient access to motives; rather, they show how motives were attributed, debated internally, and codified into recommended practice. The diplomat appears in a dual role: as official emissary and covert channel for intelligence on third states. Conversely, the host state acts both as protocol partner and as evaluator of the partnership itself. The value of the records lies in their sequential density – names, dates, locations, requests, proposed follow-ups – and, above all, in illuminating the administrative mechanics by which diplomatic ambiguity becomes actionable.

Historical Background: From Habsburg Consulates to Nasser's Golden Age

For a long time, Hungary paid relatively little attention to the Arab world, and its early contacts with Egypt developed within the broader context of Habsburg–Ottoman competition. After the Peace Treaty of Passarowitz (Požarevac) in 1718, Vienna gradually established a permanent consular presence in Egypt: an Austrian consular agent began operating there in the late eighteenth century, and the main consulate was temporarily moved from Alexandria to Cairo in 1811 before returning to Alexandria in 1819, with subordinate consular posts in Cairo, Damietta and Rosetta. By 1910, the Austro–Hungarian consular network in Egypt comprised a consulate-general and a consular court in Cairo, consulates in Alexandria and Port Said (both with consular courts), and a consulate in Khartoum (Komár, 2012, pp. 71–74). The First World War interrupted this institutional presence when, in September 1914, British forces ordered the closure of the Austro–Hungarian consulate in Cairo and entrusted the protection of its interests to the United States representative (Agstner, 1995, pp. 7–8).

After the dissolution of the Dual Monarchy and the Treaty of Trianon (4 June 1920), Hungary lost the imperial framework and extraterritorial privileges under which its interests in Egypt had previously been represented. Nonetheless, it sought to maintain a modest but autonomous presence: in 1923 Budapest decided to establish an independent honorary consulate general in Egypt, which began operating in Alexandria in 1924, and in 1928 Félix Parcher, the first Plenipotentiary Minister of Hungary in Cairo, presented his credentials to King Fuad.⁴ That same year saw the conclusion of the first, and one of the most important, Hungarian–Egyptian commercial agreements and the creation of the Egyptian subsidiary of the Ganz company, signalling the growing economic dimension of bilateral relations (Al-Naggar, 2015, pp. 63–83).

In the 1930s, diplomacy was accompanied by high-level economic missions. Regent Miklós Horthy Jr. visited Egypt repeatedly (in 1932, 1934, 1935, 1938 and 1939), spending weeks or months in the country to explore opportunities for expanding trade and establishing joint ventures. Among other initiatives, his mediation led to the creation of the Magyar–Egyiptomi Részvénytársaság (Hungarian–Egyptian Joint-Stock Company) in 1933 and, in 1935, the opening of the HUNEGYPT Travel Bureau offices in Alexandria and Cairo to promote tourism. On the Egyptian side, Prime Minister Ismail Sidqi Pasha's 1932 visit to Hungary, during which he showed particular interest in Hungarian rolling stock, agricultural products and remount horses, further deepened bilateral economic relations; by 1937, Hungarian exports to Egypt had reached 12 million pengő. This promising trajectory, to which Hungarian shipbuilding and maritime transport also contributed, was cut short by the Second World War, and in 1942, under strong British influence, Egypt broke off diplomatic relations with wartime Hungary (Al-Naggar & Prantner, 2023, pp. 163–165).

Diplomatic relations were restored in 1947, after the Paris Peace Treaty, and between 1949 and 1955 bilateral trade stabilised at around three million Egyptian pounds annually, usually with a surplus in Hungary's favour. As the Middle East gained importance in Hungarian foreign policy, mutual trade more than doubled between early 1955 and June 1956. The real “golden age” of Egyptian–Hungarian relations, however, came in the 1960s, during the Nasser era, when political solidarity within the socialist and anti-colonial camp combined with an explicit priority on widening and deepening economic and commercial cooperation, above all to enable Hungary to earn hard currency revenues from transactions with Egypt (Nagy, 2015, pp. 16–21).

The Suez Crisis of 1956 marked a turning point, accelerating Egypt's pivot towards the Eastern bloc. Hungary, alongside other socialist states, provided crucial diplomatic support at the UN and became a key partner in industrial projects (e.g. the Ganz Works' contributions to Egyptian machinery), and cultural exchanges, including the arrival of the first cohorts of Egyptian students in Hungarian universities for engineering and

⁴ Initially, Hungarian interests in Egypt were represented from Bern, and later from Budapest, until the Hungarian legation in Cairo was officially opened in 1939 under the leadership of Hungarian chargé d'affaires Andor Semsey.

medicine by 1958 (Nagy et al., 2024, pp. 11–44; Aboushanab, 2025, pp. 171–201; State Information Service, 2015).

Nabil Fahmy, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Egypt notes that Nasser's post-revolutionary diplomatic cadre, including figures like Fawzi, embodied this shift, serving as conduits for both economic cooperation and and Intelligence Service oversight in socialist capitals (Fahmy 2020, 147–149).

OSMAN FAWZI: Managed Contact, Information Requests, and the Craft of Ambiguity (1958–1959)

In October 1958, "Takács" (Police Major Endre Torda, head of the Cairo residency) was introduced by the head of the commercial mission to Counsellor Osman Fawzi (born Cairo, 17 April 1916), the second-ranking diplomat at Egypt's Embassy in Budapest (ÁBTL, 1958e, p. 19).

As a representative of the new generation of Egyptian diplomats who emerged after the 23 July 1952 Revolution, Osman Fawzi's career in Budapest can be understood only within the broader transformation of Egyptian diplomacy from a conservative monarchical elite to one closely linked to Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalist and social project. Under Foreign Minister Mahmoud Fawzi, Cairo systematically restructured its foreign service, combining conventional diplomatic language with new alliances with the socialist bloc and anticolonial movements, while officially maintaining the language of non-alignment, especially after the 1956 Suez Crisis (MERIP, 1982; Aboushanab, 2025, pp. 171–201).

In this context, Fawzi's sympathy for the socialist model and his strong criticism of Western powers, as reflected in Hungarian security reports, appear less as purely personal convictions and more as an extension of a broader Egyptian official discourse in the late 1950s, when Moscow and the capitals of Eastern Europe became key partners in armament, industrialisation and diplomatic support for Egypt at the United Nations, and when political, economic and cultural ties with the Eastern bloc – including Hungary – expanded rapidly (Arab Democratic Center, 2025).

Before returning to Hungary from leave, Fawzi and Torda had lunch together at the Gezira Club.⁵ The resident intelligence officer had heard favourable assessments of the counsellor both at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and at the Hungarian People's Republic's commercial mission in Cairo. The nearly three-hour conversation left a positive impression on Torda, though he could not determine whether his interlocutor's positions were genuine or merely expressions of diplomatic courtesy. By that time,

⁵ The Gezira Sporting Club on Zamalek Island in Cairo was established in 1882 as the Khedivial Sporting Club on land leased from the Khedivial Botanical Gardens. It initially served as an exclusive retreat for British military officers and colonial administrators. By the 1950s, it had become a prestigious venue frequented by Egypt's political, diplomatic, and social elite, including high-ranking officials and foreign diplomats. Following its nationalisation in January 1952 under Nasser, it transitioned from a private aristocratic club to a public multi-sport facility, while retaining its status as a key social hub.



Fawzi had already served in Hungary for four years, about which he held a favourable opinion. He acknowledged the system's achievements and viewed the socialist model as the future. He strongly condemned the Western powers, which Torda attributed unequivocally to Fawzi's being under Nasser's influence, given that he himself had been a military officer sympathetic to the revolutionary movement in the early 1950s. Nevertheless, it was apparent that Fawzi no longer agreed entirely with the Egyptian president's system. The counsellor advocated comprehensive economic planning, as he considered domestic industrial development too haphazard and insufficiently thought-out. At the same time, he emphasized that the abolition of the monarchy alone had failed to resolve the most pressing problems afflicting his country. In his assessment, the policy of neutrality could not be sustained indefinitely; sooner or later a position would have to be taken, which both Nasser and private property owners greatly feared. Demands for social reform were growing, which would have entailed foreign policy commitments; consequently, the government preferred to cling to neutrality. He spoke with sharp criticism of Egypt's ambassador in Budapest, characterizing him as an ossified remnant from the monarchical era, hostile to Hungary, whose connections consisted of representatives of the pre-1945 world (ÁBTL, 1958a, pp. 4–5).

The counsellor did not speak much about his own life, but given the nature of the conversation, Torda saw no point in pressing the matter. During the Second World War, Fawzi had served as an intelligence officer in the Egyptian army before entering the diplomatic service. Torda learned that Fawzi had been military attaché in Prague or had held a subordinate position there. This meant he had worked for intelligence services, and it could not be ruled out that he continued such activities. Fawzi regarded his superior as an obstacle to rapprochement; relations between them were decidedly poor, and he complained about the ambassador repeatedly to Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials. Szijártó believed that Fawzi's deepest desire was for Nasser to remove his superior and install him in his place. He expected support from the Hungarian People's Republic in this regard, though it remained unclear whether his activities were driven by careerism or genuine sympathy for state socialism. Torda nevertheless believed that even in the former case, the diplomat could be exploited, as there was a strong likelihood he would eventually be posted to the Egyptian Foreign Ministry (ÁBTL, 1958a, pp. 4–6).

Fawzi's sharp judgement of his ambassador as a "leftover" from the royal era aligns with literature on Egyptian foreign policy, which describes a post-revolutionary "purge" of the diplomatic corps, as the new regime sought to replace monarchist-linked liberal diplomats with Free Officers and civilians loyal to the July regime. Studies on Nasser-era decision-making emphasise that, throughout the 1950s, many embassies were staffed by two ideologically divergent generations, often resulting in internal tensions and mutual efforts to demonstrate greater loyalty to Nasser's policies on issues such as Iraq, Syria, and the treatment of Arab communists (BBC News Arabic, 2024). From this perspective, Fawzi's denunciation of his superior as both reactionary and anti-communist can be seen not merely as a personal dispute but as part of a broader political

culture within the state apparatus, where professional competition intersected with ideological polarisation, and some younger diplomats used their proximity to socialist capitals to enhance their standing in Cairo by presenting themselves as more committed advocates of closer ties with the Eastern bloc. This internal contestation reflected wider Nasser-era tensions between "old diplomacy" loyalists and a new cadre shaped by revolutionary ideology, a process that Foreign Minister Mahmoud Fawzi institutionalised through diplomatic academy reforms prioritising ideological alignment alongside technical training (Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

On 3 December 1958, the Cairo newspaper *Al-Misa*⁶ reported that President Nasser had recalled Ambassador Nafe Zade⁷ from his post in Budapest and appointed him to head the Administrative Department of the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The following day, János Radványi (codename "Tinta Pál"), head of the Protocol Department at the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, summoned the counsellor (codename "Lovassi") to clarify the situation. When Radványi addressed Fawzi as ambassador, the latter took it as a joke, but upon learning of his superior's recall to Cairo, he was visibly transformed. He then emphasized that the decision had been expected, as Nasser was gradually replacing members of the old diplomatic corps. At the same time, the elder Fawzi had written to inform him that Zade would likely retire, and that his son would succeed him. Osman Fawzi, however, indicated that any promotion would almost certainly be accompanied by reassignment. Radványi then shared the *Al-Misa* report, which evidently surprised the counsellor. The newspaper's editor-in-chief, Mohieddin,⁸ was a friend of Fawzi's whose information typically proved accurate. The position of head of the Administrative Department had long been vacant, making the reported change plausible. The counsellor subsequently emphasized repeatedly how much he enjoyed living in Budapest and that, given his established network of contacts, he could advance bilateral relations. Radványi likewise stated that the government of the Hungarian People's Republic also wished Osman Fawzi to lead the United Arab Republic's mission in Budapest and had already instructed the Hungarian ambassador in Cairo to convey Hungary's preference. Fawzi then declared

⁶ Also well-known as Al-Masaa (Al-Messa') is an Egyptian Arabic-language daily evening newspaper published in Cairo, founded in October 1956 as the first and oldest evening paper in the republic and issued by the state-owned Dar Al-Tahrir (Al-Gomhuria) publishing house, with its early editorial line shaped by leftist and Marxist journalists in the late Nasser era.

⁷ Abdel-Hamid Nafe Zade presented his letters of credence on 19 April 1957. Following the upgrading of Egyptian–Hungarian diplomatic relations to ambassadorial level, he was accredited from 6 August 1957 as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United Arab Republic in Budapest. For more details, see (Al-Naggar, 2021, p. 289).

⁸ Khaled Mohieddin (1922–2018), Free Officer (joined 1944), Revolutionary Command Council member (1952–54), dubbed "the Red Sergeant" by Nasser for leftist views. Resigned 1954 after calling for democratic return to barracks; exiled briefly to Switzerland. Elected to National Assembly (1957, Kafr Shokr); founded Al-Misa newspaper (first evening daily in republican era); chaired Nubian displacement committee (1960s). President of Dar Akhbar al-Yawm (1964–65); founded Arab Unity Party (1976, later National Progressive Unionist Party).

that he fully agreed with President Nasser's policy toward the socialist countries, which he had also affirmed before Minister Rifaat,⁹ one of the security service leaders, during his most recent stay in Cairo. He simultaneously indicated to the latter that Zade was unsuitable for advancing Hungarian–Egyptian relations because he was sharply anti-communist. Rifaat was an old comrade-in-arms of Fawzi's; on one occasion he had delivered 12,000 rifle cartridges to the insurgents, which Fawzi managed to transport across colonial forces' lines using credentials issued by British military intelligence. During the revolution, he briefly detained Ali Sabri,¹⁰ with whom relations had remained strained ever since. He also revealed a secret instruction sent from Cairo, according to which he was to refute American rumours circulating among staff at the Egyptian embassy in Budapest regarding alleged serious disagreements between Abdel-Karim Qasim¹¹ (president of Iraq) and Nasser. According to Fawzi, the relationship between Qasim and Aref resembled to that which had existed between Nasser and Naguib. The instruction was difficult to execute, as the American chargé d'affaires, Garet Ackerson, would at most return his greeting, while other Western diplomats followed the position of the U.S. embassy. Radványi then indicated that opposing the United States was a common objective, but that Hungary did not interfere in Egypt's internal affairs. What Hungary needed to know it would ask through official channels, and the counsellor would respond within the limits of his capacity. This, however, also applied to Hungary's case. Fawzi accepted this, showed himself willing to cooperate, and asserted that neither he nor Radványi could be bought with dollars (ÁBTL, 1958b, pp. 7–9).

The close connection between Fawzi and figures in the Egyptian security apparatus, as revealed by the Hungarian documents, fits into a broader pattern described in Egyptian diplomatic memoirs and studies of the Nasser period: many Egyptian embassies served as contact points between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the General Intelligence Service or military intelligence, especially in countries regarded as arenas of East–West competition. Memoirs by contemporaries note the emergence of the “diplomat–officer” type, who combined official representation with intelligence tasks, including the collection of political and security information, surveillance of Arab communities and, occasionally, recruitment of local sources (Armstrong, 2021, pp. 7–

⁹ It is highly likely that the “Rifaat” mentioned in the report refers to Kamal al-Din Mahmoud Rifaat (1921–1977), an Egyptian army officer, Free Officers leader and later minister, who played a key role in armed resistance against British forces in the Canal Zone, in supporting Arab liberation movements (including the Iraqi revolution of 1958), and in the leadership of clandestine operations and guerrilla warfare under Nasser, before serving in ministerial and ambassadorial posts, including as Egypt's ambassador to the United Kingdom in the early 1970s.

¹⁰ Ali Sabri (1920–1991) was a leading Nasser-era politician, serving as head of the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate (1956–57), prime minister (1962–65), and then vice president (1965–68), before becoming the main civilian casualty of Sadat's 1971 “Corrective Revolution”.

¹¹ Abdel-Karim Qasim (1914–1963), an Iraqi army officer who opposed the monarchy's pro-Western orientation, led the coup (in Arabic sources revolution) of 14 July 1958 that overthrew the Hashemite regime and ruled the new republic until he himself was toppled and executed in the Ba'athist-led coup of February 1963.

34; Al-Ansari, 2014). Against this background, Fawzi's role in transmitting secret instructions regarding Cairo's position on the conflict between Abdel-Karim Qasim and Nasser, or on Ba'athist¹² activities, can be interpreted as part of a systematic policy of managing inter-Arab conflicts within the logic of the Cold War, rather than as purely individual initiatives. Nasser's regime viewed such arenas as direct extensions of Egypt's national security, and considered the struggle against "Arab reaction" no less important than its confrontation with the traditional colonial powers (Independent Arabia, 2021).

On 9 December 1958, Fawzi visited the head of the Protocol Department at his office, but the secretary informed him that Radványi was recuperating at home. The counsellor requested his telephone number to convey his good wishes. However, when he called the department head, the latter immediately asked whether they could meet in person. Radványi explained that, although he was not contagious, he was confined to bed for the day; it was ultimately agreed with the Egyptian that he would make contact the following morning. On the 10th, at one o'clock in the afternoon, Fawzi went to the department head's residence and relayed intelligence he had obtained from Rachman, the Indian ambassador. The latter claimed that, despite the Berlin crisis and rising international tensions, Western intelligence services had reported that the Soviet Union under no circumstances wished for war. In the light of this, Washington and its allies planned to use the coming six months to detach Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary from Moscow. To achieve this objective, they were preparing to infiltrate agents, which Rachman substantiated with a translation of an English-language newspaper article. According to the Indian chargé d'affaires, numerous substantial arms depots were being established in Hungary, for example in Csepel, where the working class had played a significant role in 1956. Fawzi inquired how such large quantities of weapons would be smuggled in, to which he received the reply: under the auspices of the International Red Cross. The counsellor took this intelligence seriously and wished to warn Radványi, as Nasser also had no interest in the collapse of the Hungarian system. He added that Western propaganda was making serious efforts to influence Hungarian public opinion, which one of his most reliable informants had also confirmed. Radványi politely thanked him for the warning and agreed that the Western powers were attacking the countries of the socialist bloc and the Arab world in line with their traditions. The assassination attempt against Qasim and the pressure exerted on Nasser clearly indicated this. Fawzi then read from a green notebook, stating that he wished to obtain recently adopted social welfare, labour protection, and industrial legislation. Egypt wanted to study Hungarian experience, which Radványi welcomed. The counsellor, however, also inquired why János Kádár had not travelled to Prague with the government delegation, and asked about the purpose of the visit. He then turned to the matter of reciprocating

¹² The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, founded in Damascus in 1947 by Michel Aflaq, Salah al-Din al-Bitar, and Zaki al-Arsuzi, promoted a centralized, authoritarian brand of Pan-Arab socialism and eventually took power in Syria (1963) and Iraq (1968), where it ruled until being overthrown in the early twenty-first century in Iraq and in 2024 in Syria.



the information he had provided. Fawzi planned to submit a memorandum on Israel's economic boycott against Egypt and requested its wide dissemination. He also asked whether there was a Hungarian–Israeli cultural agreement. Radványi indicated that there were not, yet any exchange programmes. The counsellor then asked whether Israel's five-year plan could be found among the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' materials, as the military provisions would be important to him. The department head committed only to looking into the question, while Fawzi suggested that it would be easier for Hungary to learn about Israeli plans, since the Hungarian People's Republic maintained an embassy in Tel Aviv. He also asked who was serving as Israeli chargé d'affaires in Tuval's absence. Radványi informed him that it was Mrs Kadar Lu, the Hungarian desk officer at the Jerusalem Foreign Ministry. Fawzi noted this in his notebook while complaining that Rachman had said nothing about Israel's Budapest mission, even though his daughter was on good terms with Tuval's son (ÁBTL, 1958c, pp. 10–12).

Police Captain Pál Iglói believed that Fawzi showed sympathy for the system because he realised this was the only way to establish contact with potential sources. Radványi, however, was surprised by the proposal for information exchange, about which Fawzi had informed his superiors. It is likely that he had been instructed from Cairo to obtain materials on Israel through Radványi's assistance, but the reciprocation offered was rather inconsequential. According to Iglói, the Egyptian diplomat was clearly conducting intelligence activities and was primarily attempting to recruit Radványi for operations directed at Israel. He therefore recommended that Radványi summon the Egyptian 8–10 days later to inform him that the social welfare and labour protection legislation would be made available, but that the Israeli five-year plan was not in the Ministry's possession. If the request were specified, however, measures could be taken to procure it. Regarding what Fawzi had reported, the department head should state that while interesting, it was too general. Fawzi had referenced the Indian ambassador Rachman, who had heard all this from his wife. The Egyptian diplomat, however, claimed that the woman was an American agent. Therefore, the counsellor should be asked to obtain proof. If he were not given a substantive task, it would cause a rupture in the relationship; moreover, investigation of Rachman's wife would reveal how much credence could be given to his reports (ÁBTL, 1958d, pp. 13–18).

On 13 March 1959, Fawzi again appeared at Radványi's office, where he orally translated an Arabic-language telegram in his possession. The United Arab Republic praised the Kádár leadership for not permitting the emigration of Jews to Israel. Cairo blamed the United States, arguing that most immigrants came from the Western Hemisphere and were supported by substantial sums from the American Jewish community. Confusion had arisen during the preceding period because emigration from Romania to Israel was transiting through Hungary. Attaché Pasha had observed Hungarian-speaking groups at Keleti Railway Station, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs clarified that these were not Hungarian citizens. Radványi indicated that Ambassador Szijártó in Cairo had already presented the official position of the Hungarian People's Republic. Fawzi, however, then criticised Nasser's Damascus speech for characterising

Iraqi and Syrian communists gathering in Iran as foreign agents. The counsellor did not understand why this was necessary, since the accused individuals could only have been agents of the Soviet Union and its allied countries, even though only the Eastern bloc showed understanding towards the Arab world. Fawzi believed that Vice Presidents Zakaria Mohieddin,¹³ Baghdadi,¹⁴ and Hornai¹⁵ were influencing Nasser in a very bad direction (ÁBTL, 1959a, pp. 31–32).

On the evening of 19 March 1959, at 8 o'clock, Radványi visited the counsellor at his apartment at 7/a Mihály Street. Fawzi expressed his dissatisfaction with anti-Soviet demonstrations taking place in major Egyptian cities and feared that British intelligence personnel were among the nearly 1,200 British economic experts arriving in Cairo. The counsellor suspected that a coup was being prepared against the president, in which the delegation would also participate. Regarding the visa issue of the Syrian merchant Mohamed Miadmi, he stated that he understood the refusal, as the BUADVOX partner was too closely associated with the Western business world. Fawzi indicated that Nafé Zade would soon return to Budapest, but this would primarily be a farewell visit (ÁBTL, 1959b, pp. 33–34).

HASSAN MAHER

Hassan Maher, as he appears in the Hungarian archival material, represents another type within Nasser's diplomatic elite: a diplomat who formally endorsed the regime's nationalist and socialist rhetoric and professed sympathy for the Soviet Union, yet privately expressed fatigue with the intensity of official propaganda and ideological pressure at home. Arab and international studies on Egyptian elites in the 1960s indicate a current among ambassadors – particularly in Western Europe – who advocated a more pragmatic approach towards the West, fearing that excessive ideological rigidity could harm the economic and cultural relations Egypt urgently needed for its development plans. Maher's complaints about state propaganda on Egyptian radio, and his expectation of an eventual political shift within Egypt, echo broader debates among

¹³ Zakaria Mohieddin (1918–2012), a Free Officer and member of the Revolutionary Command Council, founded Egypt's General Intelligence Directorate in 1955 and served as Minister of the Interior, Vice President, and Prime Minister. Known for his pragmatic stance amid Nasser's radicalism, he clashed over Yemen policy before retiring.

¹⁴ Abdel-Latif al-Baghdadi (1917–1999) was an Egyptian military officer, politician, and one of the original members of the Free Officers Movement. He served on the Revolutionary Command Council and held several key governmental positions during the Nasser era, including Minister of Municipal and Rural Affairs, Minister of Planning, and Vice President of Egypt. Al-Baghdadi was known for his socialist orientation and played a significant role in shaping Egypt's economic policies during the 1950s and early 1960s.

¹⁵ Hussein al-Shafey (also transliterated as Hornai in some Hungarian sources, 1918–2005) was an Egyptian military officer and politician who served as one of the original Free Officers and a member of the Revolutionary Command Council. He held the position of Vice President of Egypt under Nasser from 1961 to 1970, making him one of the longest-serving officials in the revolutionary government. He continued to serve under Presidents Sadat and Mubarak in various advisory capacities until his retirement.



Egyptian elites in the post-1956 and pre-1967 years regarding the limits of Arab unity projects and socialist experiments, and the regime's ability to reconcile its radical discourse with the practical demands of state management in a complex regional and international environment (Sharnoff, M., & Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, 2012, p. 14; Akhavi, 1975, pp. 190–211).

Hassan Maher assumed control of Egypt's Budapest embassy on 10 October 1959. Before this appointment, he had served in Great Britain, France, and Italy. Upon his arrival, he sought to establish cordial relations with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, emphasizing his pro-Soviet orientation and stating that only his advanced age prevented him from joining the Communist Party. Within the Budapest diplomatic corps, he maintained good relations with the American, Italian, and Indian legations. In early August 1960, his wife died unexpectedly; he had her body transported to Cairo on the 11th and subsequently withdrew from public life for nearly three months. When he returned to Budapest on 11 November, he reported the following to network personnel of the Ministry of Interior's II/2 Department. On 7 November 1960, the Egyptian Deputy Foreign Minister summoned him for interrogation concerning the embassy chauffeur and his wife. His superiors reproached him for his romantic relationship with the woman and for allegedly disclosing all embassy matters to her husband. Maher insisted that he had only discussed matters that Tibor Baloványi, his driver, necessarily needed to know, and that he would hardly appear publicly with the latter's wife if there were anything between them. He admitted to having a girlfriend in Budapest whom he would name if requested, though this was not public knowledge in Hungary. At the Deputy Foreign Minister's instruction, he wrote a 12-page report; only thereafter was he permitted to return to Budapest. Maher accused Attaché Esmat and First Secretary Khalaf of defamation; nevertheless, on 30 November 1960, Cairo ordered his recall effective 20 December. The ambassador, however, did not wish to return immediately and made no preparations to do so. Instead, he attempted to intercede with János Radványi, head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Protocol Department, proposing that the Hungarian People's Republic purchase from him a Cairo property rented by the Italian embassy in exchange for an apartment in Hungary. Radványi responded favourably to the proposal, planning to offer him a villa on Lake Balaton. Maher wished to spend most of his time there, as he was devoted to Hungary; at the same time, he approached the department head with a request to be placed with a Hungarian foreign trade company as an expert on the Arab world. Maher's cousin had been ambassador in Bern but had also been recalled. According to Hassan Maher, the reason for their fall from favour was their insufficient support for Nasser's policies. The Egyptian government was increasingly sending the president's former comrades-in-arms into diplomatic service. Around 10 December, Maher visited American Chargé d'Affaires Garet Ackerson, before whom he explained that communist ideas had no genuine basis among ordinary people, serving rather as an instrument of protest against Nasser among young intellectuals. The president's propaganda had begun to irritate even him; during their three-month stay at home, he had not once turned on Cairo Radio. Maher

anticipated a political shift in Egypt within a few months, while also proposing the establishment of a Hungarian-Egyptian society under his presidency (ÁBTL, 1960b, pp. 7–9).

Shortly thereafter, however, he stated that he wished to cooperate with the Hungarian People's Republic before the British could approach him. In London, they had tried to win him over by promising him a ministerial post in the Egyptian government. He rejected this, stating that he could not serve two kings. Maher did not elaborate on the type of cooperation he envisaged; however, according to Police Major Tibor Vadász, it would be political in nature. The diplomat admitted he had no understanding of economics, though he undertook to prepare himself in this area as well. Before the competent official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maher also acknowledged that he was in a romantic relationship with his chauffeur's wife. Radványi communicated that he would arrange a meeting between Maher and the head of the Chamber of Commerce, whereupon the conversation would at most turn to political matters. The objective was to have him report on his connections with Western legations and the plans of Nasser and his circle (ÁBTL, 1960c, pp. 16–18).

On 16 December 1960, Maher asked Radványi that employees with whom he was on friendly terms - Mrs. Szmolenszki, the chauffeur and his wife - not be subject to harassment by the police. The former ambassador indicated that he had never politicized with those concerned, nor solicited them for anti-state activities. Concurrently, the conversation focused primarily on the chauffeur, whom Maher wished to protect from his successor's dismissal decision. If the new envoy had someone else in mind, he saw the solution in posting Tibor Baloványi to Cairo. Three days later, Maher telephoned with the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to announce his resignation. Cairo did not accept this, so the envoy planned to travel home on the evening of the 22nd or the morning of the 23rd via Vienna to make a written statement. At the same time, he indicated his intention to return, entrusting his automobile to Tibor Baloványi. Before the chauffeur on the 20th, he aired the matter that at his meeting with the president of the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce, two other individuals had been present who attempted to corner him. Their objective would have been for Maher to work as an agent against other countries, but as soon as he protested, President Ödön Kallós apologized to him. He attributed the misunderstanding to incorrect interpretation (ÁBTL, 1960d, pp. 21–22).

On 19 December 1960, Kallós received Maher at the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce building, intending to bring Police Captain Imre Borsányi and Police Major Tibor Vadász – whom he introduced as a staff member of the Council of Ministers – into the conversation at an appropriate moment. Maher explained that he wished to visit Hungary from time to time, but Egyptian law permitted this only for official purposes. He had no concrete plan for legalising his entries and awaited assistance in this matter. However, Maher avoided the question of cooperation; Vadász managed only to establish that they would consult the former ambassador on economic and political matters. When asked why he would not remain in the foreign service, Maher

replied only that it was for personal reasons. The police major then indicated that the Hungarian People's Republic did not wish to interfere in Egypt's internal affairs but could assist regarding Yugoslavia's and West Germany's influence on Cairo. Maher stated that he had no information on this matter because he had no connection with his country's special services. At the same time, he emphasised that he could only envisage any cooperation in a form with which his government would also identify. Vadász responded that, to address the questions raised, one need not be connected to intelligence or counterintelligence organs, as his diplomatic career would enable him to learn many things. As the major pointed out that he sensed Maher was merely seeking an opportunity for frequent entry, they could find some contrived possibility at any time. The former envoy then began to consider what awaited him at home, stating that he would only make contact with the Hungarian People's Republic's Cairo mission if the situation became clearer. Vadász agreed with this approach and added that he would be very pleased if Maher continued his foreign service in another country. As an ambassador favourably disposed towards the Hungarian People's Republic, Maher could do much to promote peaceful coexistence. Referring to Radványi's remark, the major urged Maher to raise the issue of the Hungarian-Egyptian society in Cairo as well, where he could also indicate that Budapest was considering his proposal. Vadász would have been pleased if Maher became the society's president; however, this would mean that a visit to Budapest would only be possible once a year. The former envoy proposed awarding Maher a Hungarian decoration, which, according to the major, would have strengthened Maher's position at home. The diplomat also advised caution, as Nasser strictly suppressed any expression of communist ideology. Among the socialist bloc, Egyptian public opinion sympathised with Hungary and the Soviet Union, but not with the others. According to Vadász's assessment, no significant result was expected from the meeting, but the conversation could continue during his next visit to Budapest or, if he were posted elsewhere, in a third country. If his recall did not affect his relationship with the Hungarian People's Republic, engaging with the diplomat seemed worthwhile. The Cairo embassy would need to monitor Maher's movements and employment so that a meeting could later be arranged with him outside Egyptian territory. The conversation was conducted in French, with Borsányi acting as interpreter. With the suspension of the Cairo residency, the material was filed in the archives (ÁBTL, 1960a, p. 29).

Two Models of Diplomatic Engagement

Osman Fawzi and Hassan Maher represent contrasting models of Egyptian diplomacy during the Nasser era, and their divergent paths highlight both the possibilities and limitations of Cold War diplomatic instrumentalisation. Fawzi embodied the ideologically committed, upwardly mobile revolutionary diplomat. Born in 1916, he came of age during the final years of the monarchy and participated in the military ferment that culminated in July 1952. His previous service in Prague and his fluency in the language of socialist solidarity made him appear to Hungarian interlocutors as a

potential asset. The Hungarian files depict him as ambitious, calculating, and willing to exchange information – on Israeli military planning, inter-Arab conflicts, and Cairo's internal debates – in return for Hungarian support for his career advancement. Whether motivated by genuine ideological conviction or tactical careerism, Fawzi consistently demonstrated a willingness to engage beyond protocol: sharing classified cables, criticising his superiors, and positioning himself as an intermediary between Budapest and Cairo. Fawzi's usefulness to Hungarian intelligence remained limited. His information requests – Israeli five-year plans, social legislation, details on Hungarian-Israeli diplomatic personnel – were met with measured responses: sufficient cooperation to maintain the relationship, but not enough commitment to create dependency or expose Hungarian sources. The Hungarians recognized that Fawzi's ambitions made him useful but also unreliable; his criticism of Nasser's vice presidents and his complaints about Egyptian policy incoherence suggested a diplomat out of step with Cairo's official line, potentially a liability if his indiscretions reached Egyptian security organs.

Maher, by contrast, represented the exhausted pragmatist: a career diplomat who had served in Western Europe, professed loyalty to Nasser while privately expressing fatigue with propaganda and ideological rigidity, and sought post-retirement in Hungary not out of political commitment but for personal comfort. His wife's death, the scandal involving his driver's wife, and his recall to Cairo in disgrace all suggest a man whose diplomatic career had collapsed, leaving him vulnerable to Hungarian approaches yet wary of outright collaboration. The December 1960 recruitment meeting reveals this ambivalence: Maher entertained the possibility of "cooperation", proposed the idea of a Hungarian-Egyptian friendship society he might lead (providing cover for continued contact), yet repeatedly insisted that such work align with Cairo's official positions. His caution, combined with his admitted ignorance of economic matters and his focus on securing residency rather than intelligence tasks, led Hungarian officers to conclude that cultivation should continue but expectations should remain modest.

The contrast is instructive. Fawzi was young, ideologically fluent, and professionally ambitious; Hungarian intelligence saw him as a long-term investment whose access might increase with career advancement. Maher was older, politically disillusioned, and professionally finished; his value lay not in active intelligence production but in the possibility that future postings (should he avoid permanent disgrace) might position him for passive observation or introductions to other Egyptian officials. The Hungarians pursued both, calibrating their approach to personality, circumstance, and assessed potential.

What unites both cases are the Hungarian state's willingness to operate in the grey area between diplomatic hospitality and intelligence recruitment. Radványi, as head of the Protocol Department, served dual functions: facilitating official contact and evaluating recruitment potential. His private meetings with Fawzi and Maher created opportunities for personal grievances, political opinions, and professional ambitions to be expressed, recorded, and potentially exploited. Neither diplomat appears to have been formally recruited as an agent, yet both engaged in behaviours – sharing

intelligence, criticising superiors, requesting favours – that blurred the line between diplomacy and espionage.

This blurring was structural, not exceptional. In the Cold War Eastern bloc, every foreign diplomat was a potential source; every protocol officer, a potential handler. The Egyptian Embassy in Budapest existed within this dual framework, where genuine cultural exchange and economic cooperation coexisted with surveillance, assessment, and tactical manipulation. Fawzi and Maher navigated this environment with varying degrees of awareness and success, leaving behind an archival record that reveals the everyday mechanics by which political alignment was translated – or failed to be translated – into intelligence advantage.

Conclusion

The archival material of Osman Fawzi and Hassan Maher highlights three distinct aspects of Cold War Egyptian–Hungarian relations: the mechanics of diplomatic contact under surveillance, the internal contradictions within Nasser's foreign policy apparatus, and the ways in which host states sought to exploit personal relationships for intelligence purposes.

First, these cases show that diplomacy in the Eastern bloc operated within a dual framework: public protocol and covert assessment. Both Fawzi and Maher performed routine functions of representation – protocol visits, trade discussions, cultural liaison – while simultaneously being evaluated as potential intelligence assets. The Hungarian files indicate that every meeting, request, or complaint was archived not only as a diplomatic record but also as operational data. Fawzi's inquiries about Israeli military plans and Maher's comments on Nasser's critics were interpreted as opportunities for recruitment or manipulation. This dualism was not exceptional but structural: in Cold War Budapest, the diplomat was always already a figure of suspicion and potential. Egyptian cases like Fawzi exemplify Owen L. Sirrs' analysis of *mukhabarat* (Egyptian General Intelligence Service) evolution, where embassy staff navigated East-West rivalries as both emissaries and potential assets (Sirrs, 2010, pp. 52–92).

Second, the files expose fault lines within Nasser's diplomatic corps that reflected broader tensions in the Egyptian state. Fawzi's public support for socialism and private criticism of his monarchist-era ambassador highlighted generational and ideological divisions that persisted throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. The Foreign Ministry contained competing visions of non-alignment: older diplomats maintained liberal-monarchist networks and Western cultural ties, while younger officers and revolutionaries viewed Eastern bloc partnerships as essential to anti-imperialism and state-led development. Maher's case illustrates a different tension: the gap between official enthusiasm for socialist solidarity and personal fatigue with ideological conformity. His complaints about propaganda, his longing for a political "turn" in Egypt, and his simultaneous professions of loyalty suggest a diplomat caught between regime expectations and personal disillusionment – a position the Hungarian security apparatus sought to exploit.

Third, the archive shows how host states adjusted their approach to diplomatic contact according to personality, perceived utility, and political calculation. Fawzi was cultivated – but not recruited (!) – because Hungarian officers believed he could provide intelligence on Israel, inter-Arab conflicts, and internal debates in Cairo; his ambition and ideological rhetoric made him seem manageable. Maher, by contrast, was approached more cautiously: his request for post-retirement residence in Hungary and his vague offers of "cooperation" were met with polite interest but little commitment. The Hungarians recognised that his value lay not in immediate intelligence but in the potential for future access should he return to diplomatic service elsewhere. In both cases, the host state acted as protocol partner and prospective handler, constantly weighing whether hospitality, information exchange, or recruitment overtures would serve Hungarian interests without jeopardising the broader bilateral relationship.

Beyond these substantive findings, this study contributes to methodological debates on the use of intelligence archives in diplomatic history. Security files are seductive sources: richly detailed, narratively compelling, and seemingly authoritative. However, they are also distorting mirrors, reflecting the institutional paranoia and tactical opportunism of their creators. By foregrounding the archival voice – its judgments, prescriptions, and omissions – rather than treating it as transparent evidence, this article has aimed to recover not "what really happened" but how diplomatic ambiguity was produced, managed, and inscribed into state practice. Future research incorporating Egyptian archival sources, Soviet bloc files, and oral histories would enable a more polyphonic reconstruction, challenging the one-sidedness inherent in security documentation and recovering the voices – diplomatic, personal, dissenting – that surveillance sought to capture but could never fully contain.

The Egyptian embassy in Budapest between 1958 and 1960 functioned more than a diplomatic outpost; it was a contact zone where competing visions of non-alignment, socialism, and national interest collided, a site where personal ambition and state discipline intersected, and a bureaucratic space where protocol concealed intelligence work. Osman Fawzi and Hassan Maher navigated this environment with varying degrees of success, leaving an archival record that reveals as much about the hidden machinery of the Cold War as about the individuals caught within it.

Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributors

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Emerging Pan-African Multilateral Financial Institutions and Development Finance in Sanctioned African States: The Case of Afreximbank's Engagement with Zimbabwe¹

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Abstract:

Emerging Pan-African multilateral financial institutions are increasingly shaping Africa's post-colonial financial architecture through development finance, investments and regional economic integration initiatives. These institutions have expanded their economic and financial resources, enabling them to deploy innovative financial and monetary tools to advance Africa's development. Yet, surprisingly, the engagement of Pan-African multilateral financial institutions with African countries under Western unilateral economic sanctions has remained underexplored in the existing sanctions literature. This article addresses this gap by examining the role of the African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank) in facilitating development finance and investments in African countries subject to Western unilateral sanctions. The paper adopts a case study research design, employing multiple secondary sources, including institutional documents, national policy reports, international standardised datasets and peer-reviewed academic sources. The findings reveal that Afreximbank has provided sustained alternative development finance and investments that have played a significant role in mitigating the adverse effects of Western unilateral sanctions on Zimbabwe. These findings are critical in challenging the conventional wisdom that portrays Africa as a passive recipient of Western economic policies. The paper shows the growing agency of a Pan-African multilateral financial institution in response to Western unilateral sanctions, as evidenced by Afreximbank's capacity to design and deploy trade finance, development finance and crisis-response instruments as alternatives to Bretton Woods institutions in contexts where those institutions have suspended or restricted engagement.

Keywords:

Economic Sanctions;
Pan-African Multilateral
Institutions;
Afreximbank;
Zimbabwe;
Development Finance;
African Agency.

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Introduction

Unilateral economic and financial sanctions, though primarily intended to exert economic and political pressure, have frequently led to the marginalisation of targeted states within the global financial system. The financial dimension of unilateral sanctions operates by constraining affected countries in four dimensions: (1) borrowing and financing trade, (2) saving and investing in global financial markets, (3) accessing development finance and (4) utilising international financial payment systems (Hatipoglu and Peksen, 2018; Hufbauer and Jung, 2021; Itskhoki and Ribakova, 2024). Several studies have shown that Western unilateral sanctions have constrained sanctioned states' access to international development finance, trade finance, correspondent banking relationships and capital markets (Drezner, 2015; Raynor, 2022; Zhou et al., 2025). Therefore, the intersection of unilateral sanctions with international financial capital has created acute financing gaps for sanctioned states. For instance, Gurvich and Prilepskiy's (2015) study on the impact of Western financial sanctions on the Russian economy shows that the sanctions severely constrained investments, negatively affecting the banking sector and the broader economy. As a result, Russia's gross capital inflows shrank by approximately USD 280 billion (Gurvich and Prilepskiy, 2015). For developing African countries, the impact of unilateral financial sanctions has been severe, given acute development challenges that require access to development finance and foreign investment. These unilateral sanctions have often interacted with pre-existing structural vulnerabilities and domestic governance conditions. Such constraints have significantly limited economic growth prospects and reinforced structural vulnerabilities within the continent's struggling economies. This has been the case for Zimbabwe, which has been subjected to a sustained regime of Western unilateral sanctions for two decades by the United States, the European Union (EU) and their allies, without UN Security Council authorisation (Mujana and Sertac, 2025).

Traditional Multilateral Financial Institutions (MFIs), such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, further exacerbate the marginalisation of sanctioned African states within the global financial system. These institutions, often influenced by Western states, impose lending restrictions and conditionalities that indirectly reinforce existing sanction regimes (Peksen and Woo, 2018). These measures constrain sanctioned states' access to financial capital and deepen their exclusion from international markets (Gutmann et al, 2023). Several studies have argued that the United States and its G7 allies have, in many instances, used the MFIs as vehicles to advance their economic foreign policy agenda (Bird and Rowlands, 2016; Lama, 2023). According to Exotic Capital (2019), a combination of arrears and United States sanctions led the IMF and the World Bank to suspend lending to Sudan, making it the least country in Africa to receive development financing from the Bretton Woods institutions. Similarly, the United States and its Western allies vetoed Zimbabwe's annual application to the IMF in 1998 before suspending development finance entirely the following year

(Mujana and Sertac, 2025; Simpson and Hawkins, 2018), demonstrating how MFIs reinforce financial isolation, particularly in sanctioned states. This marginalisation from global finance and investment has led sanctioned African countries to seek alternative investors and financiers beyond the Bretton Woods institutions.

It is against this background that several studies have explored how sanctioned African states are engaging new sources of external finance. Four key sources of alternative development finance and investment are well documented in the existing literature. First, China has emerged as a significant global alternative to Western development finance (Alves, 2017; Gazze, 2010; Singh, 2020). By 2018, the Bank for International Settlements ranked China as the sixth-largest international creditor in the world (Koch and Remolona, 2018). Second, India and Russia are also emerging as alternative sources of development finance and investments for sanctioned African countries (Deng, 2023; Nyere, 2025; Svoboda, 2024). Third, the Middle East and Gulf States have recently become new sources of financing for African countries (Mosley et al., 2021; Pericoli and Donelli, 2024). According to Ding (2024), between 2000 and 2017, the Gulf states' investments in the Horn of Africa reached approximately USD 13 billion, particularly in Sudan and Ethiopia. Fourth, Mujana and Sonan (2025) identified BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) as an emerging alternative economic partner for countries isolated by Western sanctions.

Yet, surprisingly, the engagement of Pan-African multilateral financial institutions (Pan-African MFIs) with African countries under Western economic sanctions has remained underexplored in the existing sanctions literature. This paper, therefore, addresses this gap by examining Afreximbank's role in facilitating development finance and investments in sanctioned African countries, using the case of Zimbabwe. In this light, the paper answers the question of under what conditions Pan-African MFIs can mitigate financial exclusion caused by unilateral sanctions, and what evidence from Afreximbank's engagement with Zimbabwe supports or limits that claim. The rationale for this study is deeply rooted in the view that emerging Pan-African MFIs are increasingly shaping Africa's post-colonial financial architecture through development finance, investments and regional economic integration initiatives. These institutions have been utilising their expanding economic and financial capabilities to develop active financial and monetary statecraft to advance Africa's development. Therefore, Afreximbank's engagement with sanctioned Zimbabwe offers a valuable lens for examining the intersection of economic sanctions, development finance, investment flows and the exercise of African agency.

It is significant to note the analytical dimension of this paper. The study does not engage in the normative and empirical questions of whether Western unilateral sanctions against Zimbabwe were justified, proportionate, or effective in achieving their stated political objectives. Also, the paper does not seek to resolve the contested debate over the primary causes of Zimbabwe's economic crisis. The paper, in line with sanctions literature, accepts the narrower premise that Western unilateral sanctions constrained Zimbabwe's access to international development finance and investments during the



sanctions period. These unilateral sanctions have often interacted with pre-existing structural vulnerabilities and domestic governance conditions. It is within this constrained financing environment that Afreximbank's engagement is examined.

Methodology

The paper adopts a case study research design on the engagement of Pan-African MFIs with African countries under Western unilateral economic sanctions. In this context, the paper examines Afreximbank's role in facilitating development finance and investment in Zimbabwe. The exploratory descriptive approach is employed to analyse Afreximbank's engagement with Zimbabwe during Western unilateral sanctions, as this remains underexplored in the sanctions literature. The paper draws on multiple secondary sources. Firstly, data is drawn from official Afreximbank institutional documents such as annual reports, press releases and Base Offering Memorandums. Secondly, Zimbabwe's data is extracted from national datasets and policy documents, such as the Ministry of Finance budget statements and the Reserve Bank's monetary policy reports. Thirdly, international multilateral datasets, such as those of the IMF and the World Bank, are consulted. Lastly, peer-reviewed academic sources and reputable media sources are engaged as key secondary sources. The data from these multiple sources is triangulated to strengthen the reliability and credibility of the findings. The analysis of the paper is anchored in its conceptual framework, which is explained in detail in the next section. The framework theorises MFIs as operating along a dual continuum of 'enabling' and 'mitigating' functions within the sanction regime. The research design has its limitations as single-case findings are not directly generalisable. Also, the data available from Afreximbank institutional documents and Zimbabwe national documents constitute evidence of intent and provision, but not of development outcomes. However, the paper's findings and analysis support theoretical transferability to comparable cases of Pan-African MFIs engagement in other sanctioned African states.

Multilateral Financial Institutions and Economic Sanctions: Conceptual Framework

The existing international political economy and sanctions literature remains predominantly state-centric (Pape, 1997; Morgan et al., 2009; Bapat and Morgan, 2009), often relegating MFIs to marginal roles and obscuring their practical influence in sanctions regimes. While the state-centric view aligns with principal-agent models of international cooperation, it conflates institutional origin with behavioural autonomy. Although MFIs have limited agency because they are state-created entities, institutionalist scholarship highlights that MFIs can exercise bounded forms of agency due to informational asymmetries (Hawkins et al., 2006), bureaucratic discretion (Nielson and Tierney, 2003) and mandate interpretation (Barnett and Finnemore, 2012; Mahoney and Thelen, 2009). Further, buttressing the agency of MFIs viewpoint, Peksen

and Woo (2018: 6) argue that the IMF is a “special agency of the United Nations, which works as an independent organisation with its own decision-making procedures and institutional structure.” Several studies have employed the case study of the IMF to portray its bureaucratic discretion as ‘apolitical’ in the way it designs its financial lending programmes (Drazen, 2004; Martin, 2006).

This conceptual framework departs from the state-centric view by theorising MFIs as key intermediaries that actively shape sanctions outcomes through financing modalities, sequencing decisions and interpretive flexibility. It advances the under-examined role of MFIs in both multilateral and unilateral sanctions regimes by conceptualising their behaviour along a dual continuum of ‘enabling’ and ‘mitigating’ functions. As ‘enablers’, MFIs deploy institutional rules, compliance mechanisms and financial conditionalities that reinforce sanctions constraints. On the other hand, as ‘mitigators’, MFIs employ alternative financing instruments, institutional flexibility and developmental support to mitigate sanctions-induced economic effects in a targeted state. This duality is structurally conditioned by the nature of the sanction’s regime. UN-mandated multilateral sanctions tend to align MFIs with enforcement and compliance mechanisms, leaving limited institutional space for deviation. By contrast, Western unilateral sanctions, lacking UN Security Council authorisation, often create institutional and normative space for MFIs to exercise operational discretion and play mitigating roles.

MFIs perform an enabling role within sanctions regimes through several interrelated mechanisms. In the context of Western unilateral sanctions, MFIs dominated by Western shareholders align their lending decisions with the political objectives of sanctioning states, thereby reinforcing the economic constraints imposed by sanctions. Peksen and Woo’s (2018) analysis of economic sanctions data covering 120 emerging market economies with IMF lending between 1975 and 2005 demonstrates that sanctioned countries are significantly less likely to receive IMF financial support. This occurs despite the IMF’s formal mandate to provide crisis assistance and financial backing to member states to restore macroeconomic stability and growth (IMF, 2025). Peksen and Woo (2018) further argue that the IMF’s withdrawal of financial support is formally justified only when sanctions are imposed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), yet, in practice, lending patterns reflect broader alignment with sanctions pressures. Similarly, the World Bank has institutionalised a formal sanctions regime to combat fraud and corruption, suspending entities found to have engaged in corrupt practices in projects financed by international financial institutions (Dubois et al., 2023; Soreide et al., 2015). Through these practices, MFIs function as ‘enablers’ within the broader sanctions architecture by aligning institutional lending and enforcement decisions with sanctions objectives.

Beyond lending decisions, MFIs also enable sanctions regimes by reinforcing financial exclusion and financial gatekeeping through compliance and risk-management frameworks. Azinge (2018) notes that MFIs such as the IMF and the World Bank play a central role in assessing, promoting, and enforcing Anti-Money Laundering (AML) and Combating the Financing of Terrorism (CFT) standards, as well as in ensuring



compliance with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) recommendations among member states. A growing body of scholarship indicates that adherence to these international financial regulatory standards can reinforce sanctions regimes by contributing to de-risking practices and the withdrawal of correspondent banking relationships with sanctioned countries (Farrell and Newman, 2019; Newman and Zhang, 2024). In this context, MFIs emerge as indirect yet consequential enforcement actors within sanctions regimes, as their compliance-oriented mechanisms constrain sanctioned states' access to development finance, trade credit and international payment systems.

On the other hand, within the duality of MFIs' functions, they also play mitigating roles in sanctions regimes through several interrelated mechanisms. Most prominently, MFIs provide alternative avenues for development finance that soften the economic impact of sanctions on targeted states. This mitigating function is most evident under conditions of unilateral sanctions, often imposed by Western states, which create institutional and normative space for MFIs to adopt more flexible and autonomous responses. The rise of emerging powers, notably the BRICS grouping, has challenged the legitimacy and effectiveness of unilateral sanctions and contributed to the creation of parallel MFIs, such as the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), designed to provide alternative sources of development finance (Mujana and Sertac, 2025; Roberts et al., 2018).

In parallel, the expansion of regional MFIs, particularly in the Global South, has increased the availability of alternative finance and investment channels for sanctioned states. Iran provides an illustrative case in which several MFIs assumed mitigating roles in response to the United States' sanctions regime. By the end of 2019, the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) had provided approximately USD 6.3 billion in development finance, explicitly justifying its engagement by recognising only United Nations, Arab League, and African Union sanctions, rather than unilateral sanctions imposed by the United States or the EU (Martínez-Galán, 2021). Therefore, the emergence and growth of regional and non-Western MFIs are reducing sanctioned states' dependence on Western-dominated financial institutions, thereby enabling them to mitigate the economic effects of unilateral sanctions.

Beyond development finance, MFIs also mitigate the effects of sanctions by sustaining targeted states' trade through specialised trade finance instruments and payment facilitation mechanisms that soften financial restrictions. These alternative trade finance vehicles play a critical role by enabling sanctioned states to import essential goods while maintaining export capacity to generate much-needed foreign exchange. Menkes' (2024) study provides valuable insights into the use of Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) to circumvent trade sanctions. A notable example is Afreximbank's attempt to establish a trade finance platform functioning as an SPV to bypass Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) related restrictions on Russian banks (Menkes, 2024; United Nations Secretary-General, 2023). The main goal was to facilitate secure transactions for Russian agricultural and fertiliser exports to African

markets. Through such payment facilitation and trade finance mechanisms, MFIs seek to support trade continuity without formally violating sanctions regimes. However, the developmental effectiveness of such support depends on implementation and disbursement. In this respect, MFIs function as ‘mitigators’ by enhancing sanctioned states’ economic resilience and adaptive capacity in contexts where sanctions severely constrain conventional financial payment processing.

Against this backdrop, Table 1 summarises the conditions under which MFIs operate either as ‘enablers’ or ‘mitigators’ of sanctions, contingent on the prevailing institutional and political context. The framework demonstrates that MFIs’ functional role is primarily shaped by the nature of the sanctions regime. In cases of multilateral sanctions authorised by the UNSC, MFIs tend to function as enablers by applying institutional rules, compliance frameworks and financial conditionalities that effectively reinforce sanctions-related constraints. By contrast, unilateral sanctions generate greater institutional and normative discretion, creating space for mitigating responses. Under such conditions, MFIs may assume a mitigative role by deploying alternative financing instruments, leveraging institutional flexibility, and providing targeted developmental support to cushion sanctions-induced economic disruptions in the affected state. The extent of MFIs’ agency is further conditioned by the identity of the sanctioning country and the degree of legal, regulatory and reputational risk to which the institution is exposed.

Analytical dimension	MFIs as enablers of sanctions	MFIs as mitigators of sanctions
<i>Primary role</i>	Reinforcing and strengthening sanctions constraints	Softening and weakening sanctions-induced economic effects
<i>Dominant sanctions context</i>	Multilateral sanctions regimes	Unilateral sanctions regimes
<i>Source of sanctions authority</i>	UNSC mandates; multilateral agreement	Unilateral sanctions without UN authorisation
<i>Institutional alignment</i>	Alignment with Western-led financial governance norms and enforcement expectations	Alignment with alternative, regional, or non-Western development priorities
<i>Theoretical anchor</i>	State-centric	Institutionalist perspectives emphasising bounded agency and mandate interpretation
<i>Core mechanisms</i>	Lending suspension; compliance enforcement; AML/CFT and FATF implementation; de-risking	Alternative development finance; flexible mandate interpretation; trade finance

		instruments; payment facilitation mechanisms
<i>Financial instruments employed</i>	Programme conditionality; sanctions compliance screening; risk-management frameworks	Development loans; emergency financing; Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs); non-Western payment platforms
<i>Impact on sanctioned states</i>	Increase financial isolation; constrained fiscal and developmental capacity.	Enhanced economic resilience; preservation of trade flows and foreign exchange earnings
<i>Institutional Risk Exposure</i>	Low legal and reputational risk due to multilateral legitimacy	Higher reputational and political risk, mitigated by normative contestation of unilateral sanctions
<i>Expected outcome for sanctions effectiveness</i>	Increased sanctions effectiveness through economic pressure	Reduced sanctions effectiveness through adaptation and circumvention
<i>Observable confirming indicators</i>	Evidence of lending reduction after sanctions imposition, termination of corresponding banking relationships as measures of de-risking and voting against sanctioned state access to capital at IFIs.	Evidence of development finance and investment facility commitments to sanctioned entities. Financing facilities are aligned with development needs rather than purely commercial.
<i>Observable disconfirming indicators</i>	Evidence that the MFIs continued to provide financing despite the sanctions pressure	Evidence that financing merely substituted for commercially available alternatives, evidence that the MFI only engaged after sanctions were relaxed.

Figure 1: Dual roles of MFIs in economic sanctions regimes *Source: Author conceptualisation.*

Therefore, this conceptual framework provides a structured analytical lens for examining the role of emerging Pan-African multilateral financial institutions in shaping responses to Western unilateral sanctions.

Emerging Pan-African Multilateral Financial Institutions: Afreximbank Brief History and Evolution as a Pan-African MFI

The African continent has made notable progress in establishing homegrown MFIs to support regional development and economic integration (Humphrey, 2019). Prominent examples include the African Development Bank (AfDB), African Finance Corporation

(AFC), Afreximbank, African Solidarity Fund (ASF), African Trade and Investment Development Insurance (ATIDI), East African Development Bank (EADB), Fund for Export Development in Africa (FEDA), Trade and Development Bank Group (TDB Group), Shelter Afrique Development Bank (SHAFDB), and the Alliance of African Multilateral Financial Institutions (AAMFI), commonly referred to as the Africa Club (Africa Finance Corporation, 2025). The emergence of these institutions is historically rooted in the post-independence development agenda of the 1960s and 1970s, when newly independent African states sought to accelerate industrialisation and economic growth through regional economic integration and collective financial mechanisms (Humphrey, 2019).

Within this broader institutional landscape, Afreximbank is an MFI established in October 1993 under the auspices of the AfDB and the African Union, with the mandate to finance and promote intra- and extra-African trade (International Finance Corporation, 2021). Afreximbank's headquarters are in Cairo, with several branches across the continent, including Abuja, Abidjan, Harare, Kampala, and Yaoundé, as well as an office in Barbados. Oramah (2020) traces the origins of Afreximbank to the Latin American debt crisis of the 1980s, which had significant spillover effects on African economies. The crisis precipitated a withdrawal of IFIs from Africa due to perceived high credit and country risks. This withdrawal resulted in acute shortages of trade finance, reflected in the stagnation of banking sector credit to the private sector at approximately 15 % of GDP from the 1980s to the early 1990s, alongside a sharp decline in exports from over 40 % between 1980 and 1986 (Oramah, 2020).

Mandate, Governance Structure and Performance

Against this backdrop, Afreximbank was established through a charter signed by member states, conferring upon it the status of an international organisation. From its inception, the Bank was conceived as a pan-African institution with a strategic mandate to enhance Africa's autonomy within the global financial and trade architecture. This mandate is reflected in its governance and ownership structure, which is organised into four distinct shareholding classes. Class A shares are reserved for African states and their designated institutions. Class B shares are allocated to African national financial institutions and African private investors (Agreement for the Establishment of the African Export-Import Bank, 1993, Article 7).

In contrast, Class C shares are held by IFIs, non-regional financial institutions and non-African private investors, while Class D shares are available to all investors (Agreement for the Establishment of the African Export-Import Bank, 1993, Article 7). By the end of 2024, the shareholding structure was as follows: Class A shareholders held a dominant 64.9% of shares, while Classes B, C, and D accounted for 25.8%, 10%, and 2.9%, respectively (Oramah, 2020; CCXI, 2025). Therefore, Afreximbank strategically positions itself as both a trade financier and development partner, enabling it to intervene in politically and financially constrained environments where Western-dominated IFIs face legal or reputational constraints on engagement.

Over the past three decades, Afreximbank has evolved into a major Pan-African MFI. By the end of 2024, the Bank's membership included 52 African and 12 Caribbean countries with significant African diaspora populations (CCXI, 2025). The Bank's total assets expanded sharply from approximately USD 144 million in 1995 to USD 35 billion by 2024 (African Export-Import Bank, 1996; 2024). In 2024 alone, Afreximbank's loan disbursements reached USD 22.3 billion, comprising USD 14.1 billion in lines of credit and USD 6 billion in direct financing (African Export-Import Bank, 2024). Compared with peers such as the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB), Afreximbank has stronger profitability and relatively larger total assets (CCXI, 2025). In terms of investment grade ratings by the end of 2024, Afreximbank was assigned by GCR (international scale) (A-), China Chengxin International Credit Rating Co., Ltd (CCXI) (AAA), Japan Credit Rating Agency (JCR) (A-) and Moody (Baa2) (African Export-Import Bank, 2026).

This expansion has strengthened Africa's agency within the global financial system by providing alternative sources of trade and development finance and reducing reliance on external financing. Beyond its balance sheet growth, Afreximbank has played a significant role in promoting regional financial integration through initiatives such as the Afreximbank Africa Diaspora Centre (AADDC), the Global Africa Gateway (GACG) and AAMFI (Oramah, 2021). These platforms aim to deepen intra-African financial cooperation, mobilise diaspora capital and link global African economic actors to continental development priorities, including support for the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (African Financials, 2025). In the same vein, the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS), a centralised financial market infrastructure launched by Afreximbank in 2019, supports the AfCFTA by enabling the efficient flow of finance across Africa and contributing to economic integration across the continent (PASS, 2025; African Export-Import Bank, 2026).

Product Offering: Trade Finance, Development Finance and Crisis-Response Mechanisms

Afreximbank's product offerings to its African member states are designed to advance four core strategic pillars: (1) intra-African trade, (2) trade finance, (3) industrialisation and export development and (4) financial soundness and institutional performance (African Export-Import Bank, 2026). Over three decades, Afreximbank has deployed a range of innovative trade finance, development finance and crisis-response instruments to support economic expansion through accelerated industrialisation and increased intra-regional trade (African Export-Import Bank, 2026).

As summarised in Figure 2, Afreximbank's product portfolio encompasses lines of credit, direct financing, project finance, export development instruments, asset-backed lending, country programmes, syndication facilities and guarantee programmes. Within its core operational focus on trade finance, it utilises instruments such as trade-related loans, letters of credit and guarantees to support African exporters and importers (African Export-Import Bank, 2025a; Oramah, 2020). These interventions aim to

address Africa's estimated annual trade finance gap of approximately USD 100 billion (African Export-Import Bank, 2025b).

Afreximbank has progressively expanded its crisis-response toolkit through mechanisms such as country programmes, the Ukraine Crisis Adjustment Trade Finance Programme for Africa, COVID-19 vaccine financing facilities and Afreximbank Trade Debt-Backed Securities (AFTRADES) (African Export-Import Bank, 2016; Awani and Chihota, 2019; Oramah, 2020). These mechanisms provide support to African economies facing external shocks and global financial volatility.

Type of Mechanisms Programme		Rationale	Approval-2024 (USD millions)
<i>Line of credit</i>	Provision of loans and guarantee facilities for small and medium-sized trading entities. Examples of facilities under this programme: (i) export-import trade finance, (ii) before and after export financing, (iii) letter of credit confirmation and refinancing and (iv) reimbursement guarantee facilities.	-addressing credit market failure -trade facilitation and liquidity support -counter-cyclical and stabilisation -to stabilise import-export flows in periods of economic volatility -financial intermediation and systematic risk reduction	14,162.34
<i>Direct financing</i>	Provision of before and after export financing, as well as trade-related corporate financing	-enhancing trade liquidity -stabilising export-oriented corporations -minimising credit market failures -diversify sectoral growth	6,023.59
<i>Project finance</i>	Provision of limited-recourse financing for infrastructure, industrialisation and export diversification projects	-supporting capital-intensive projects -facilitate export and trade supporting infrastructure -addressing market failure in long-term project finance	1,324.32
<i>Export development</i>	Promoting diversification and structural	-promotion of economic diversification	

	transformation of economies in Africa	-providing risk-mitigated financing and technical support	585.80
<i>Asset-backed lending</i>	Financing African entrepreneurs to acquire physical assets within the framework of privatisation and local-content promotion opportunities.	-provision for financing for asset acquisition -promoting privatisation and local-content business opportunities -providing inflation-protected collateral	92.00
<i>Country programme</i>	Assisting African member states confronted by economic difficulties and supporting their economic development strategies.	-supporting member states' economic development challenges -provision of economic and social resilience for African member states in economic distress	1,548.06
<i>Syndication programme</i>	Utilising International financing to support trade and project-related activities throughout the continent.	-risk sharing to mobilise international capital -support trade and project-related investments in infrastructure and energy -catalysing market development	3,262.20
<i>Guarantee programme</i>	Providing comprehensive trade support and financing solutions related to export credit and specialised trade finance	-de-risking transactions by African member states -preserving liquidity while still expanding development spillover -instilling investor confidence	

Figure 2: An overview of Afreximbank's product portfolio. Source: Author synthesis from various sources (African Export-Import Bank, 2016; 2019; 2020; 2025a; 2025b; African Financials, 2025; Oramah, 2020).

Economic Sanctions and Zimbabwe

The imposition of Western unilateral sanctions on Zimbabwe over two decades ago has generated heated debate among scholars, policymakers and political actors. The paper does not seek to resolve these debates but reflects on them before examining Afreximbank's response to the financial and investment constraints that followed. This

debate revolves around three interrelated questions: the political rationale underpinning the measures, their scope and their broader political and socio-economic implications. The scholarship reflecting the perspective of sanctioning states points to a range of interlinked factors as the basis for imposing sanctions. These include perceived democratic deficits, political repression, election rigging, corruption, human and property rights violations (Chakawa, 2022; Ray and Walsh, 2024; Rochat and Tsouloufas, 2024; Simpson and Hawkins, 2018). In contrast, scholarship reflecting the perspective of the sanctioned state advances alternative explanations. This literature emphasises Zimbabwe's land reform and indigenisation policies at the turn of the millennium which sort to address historical injustices of colonisation (Moyo et al., 2019; Chingono, 2010), the country's regional military engagements in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which conflicted with the geo-strategic interests of the United States and NATO (Chigora, 2008; Moyo and Yeros, 2013; Mutanda, 2023) and Zimbabwe's rejection of the neoliberal economic policy framework promoted by the Bretton Woods institutions (Elich, 2002).

A second area of contention concerns the scope and nature of the sanctions. One camp frames the measures as targeted sanctions against senior political elites within the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) rather than the broader population (Rochat and Tsouloufas, 2024; Jaeger, 2016). However, critics dispute this characterisation, arguing that the targeted sanctions have functioned in practice as comprehensive measures with economy-wide effects that have adversely affected the general population (Johnny, 2024).

Evolution of the West's Unilateral Sanctions Regime on Zimbabwe

A critical precursor to the imposition of Western unilateral sanctions against Zimbabwe lies in the deterioration of relations between the United Kingdom and Zimbabwe in the late 1990s (Tendi, 2014). The United Kingdom's position played a significant role in shaping broader Western responses and in setting the foundations for subsequent sanctions regimes. In this regard, Giumelli and Krulis (2012) argue that the United Kingdom assumed a leading role within the Western alliance, exerting substantial influence over the European Union's sanctions policy towards its former colony.

European Union Sanctions Regime

Following the United Kingdom's leading role, the EU introduced its first sanctions in February 2002, shortly before Zimbabwe's presidential elections. These targeted sanctions measures were justified on the grounds of alleged democratic deficits, human rights violations and concerns regarding the rule of law (Jaeger, 2016; Murambwa, 2024). The EU's Common Position 2002/145/CFSP initially listed 79 individuals, including President Robert Mugabe and senior government officials. The scope of the sanctions expanded over time. By 2009, the sanctions regime had reached its peak, with 203 individuals and approximately 40 state-owned parastatals (Murambwa, 2024).

Four key characteristics emerge when unpacking the nature and scope of the EU's sanctions regime against Zimbabwe. First, the economic sanctions regime began in 2002 following the suspension of the Cotonou Agreement under Article 96. This suspension led to the withdrawal of budgetary support and development finance, except for humanitarian assistance channelled through NGOs (Marangoni, 2014; Simpson and Hawkins, 2018). In the absence of UNSC authorisation, the EU's economic sanctions are based on the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) framework and the corresponding Council Regulations. These instruments prohibited economic transactions involving listed government officials, state-owned parastatals and associated entities. In addition, the EU froze the economic resources and assets of all listed state-owned enterprises, as well as private entities and individuals (Common Position 2002/600/CFSP).

Second, the trade-related sanctions regime targeted strategic sectors within Zimbabwe's already constrained economy. In particular, Dipama and Dal (2017) observe that the sanctioning of the Zimbabwe Mining Development Corporation (ZMDC), responsible for diamond operations, had the practical effect of imposing a de facto embargo on Zimbabwean diamonds. In the same vein, the sanctioning of the Minerals Marketing Corporation of Zimbabwe (MMCZ), responsible for the export and marketing of all minerals, effectively restricted Zimbabwe's access to international mineral markets. Beyond sector-specific measures, trade-related sanctions also operated through financial channels. The denial of access to critical trade finance and balance-of-payments support constrained Zimbabwe's ability to participate in external trade and integration into global markets.

The third component of the EU's sanctions regime against Zimbabwe comprised an arms embargo. Article 2(a) of Council Regulation (EC) No. 314/2004 explicitly states that it is prohibited:

“to grant, sell, supply or transfer technical assistance related to military activities and to the provision, manufacture, maintenance and use of arms and related materiel of all types, including weapons and ammunition, military vehicles and equipment, paramilitary equipment, and spare parts for the aforementioned, directly or indirectly to any person, entity or body in, or for use in Zimbabwe...”
Council Regulation (EC), Article 2(a) of No. 314/2004.

In addition to the arms embargo, the sanctions regime included travel restrictions. These measures imposed entry and transit bans within the EU on designated individuals, including the President of Zimbabwe, senior government officials and other persons listed under the sanctions framework (Global Sanctions, n.d.).

It is worth noting that the scope of the EU's sanctions against Zimbabwe has narrowed considerably since its initial imposition, reflecting a gradual shift towards re-engagement and normalisation of relations. Beginning in 2010, the EU initiated a process of delisting sanctioned entities and individuals. Nine state-owned parastatals and six

individuals from the sanctions list were removed (Common Decision 2010/92/CFSP). In 2013, the EU further relaxed its measures by lifting the de facto diamond embargo on Zimbabwe (Dipama and Dal, 2017). In line with this development, the EU also suspended the travel ban and asset freeze (Global Sanctions, n.d.). Accordingly, Murambwa (2024) notes that the EU progressively eased its sanctions policy between 2012 and 2022, culminating in the delisting of all targeted entities and individuals, except Zimbabwe Defence Industries (ZDI). In February 2025, the EU renewed a significantly reduced sanctions regime, extending it until 2026. At present, the sanctions consist solely of an arms embargo, following ZDI's delisting. These developments mark a substantial contraction of the EU's sanctions policy towards Zimbabwe (Global Sanctions, 2025).

United States Sanctions Regime

The United States' sanctions regime against Zimbabwe dates back to the late 1990s. In 1998, the United States imposed an arms embargo. It vetoed Zimbabwe's annual application for IMF financial support in response to the country's military intervention in the DRC, which conflicted with United States and NATO geo-strategic interests (Chigora, 2008; Moyo and Yeros, 2013). This position was formalised in 1999, when the United States leveraged its 17.4% voting share in the IMF to influence the decision to suspend lending to Zimbabwe entirely (Simpson and Hawkins, 2018; Mujana and Sonan, 2025).

In the absence of UNSC authorisation, the United States relied on its domestic legal framework to impose sanctions on Zimbabwe. This reliance on national legislation introduces tensions with general international law, particularly with respect to jurisdictional principles. In this line, Moret (2021) argues that the unilateral application of national sanctions legislation is, *prima facie*, extraterritorial and inconsistent with established norms of international law governing state jurisdiction. In 2001, the United States formalised its sanctions regime against Zimbabwe through the enactment of the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZIDERA), passed by Congress in December 2001 and subsequently amended in August 2018.

Simpson and Hawkins (2018:180) argue that the ZIDERA Act "effectively imposed economic sanctions on Zimbabwe," particularly given the United States' significant voting power within IFIs such as the World Bank and the IMF. Under ZIDERA, the United States deployed its voting power in MFIs as an instrument of unilateral financial sanctions by directing its executive directors at the IMF, World Bank and AfDB to oppose Zimbabwe's access to loans, credit guarantees, grants, debt rescheduling and debt cancellation, effectively extending the reach of unilateral sanctions into institutions that formally operate based on multilateral governance (Simpson and Hawkins, 2018). Given Zimbabwe's persistent debt distress since the 1990s, these restrictions have had severe and enduring consequences for the country's economy (Giumelli and Krulis, 2012). By the end of 2024, Zimbabwe's debt stock stood at USD 21.5 billion, accounting



for 47.1 % of GDP (Ministry of Finance, Economic Development and Investment Promotion, 2024).

According to the RBZ (2007), these informal and formal sanctions led to the Bretton Woods institutions suspending Zimbabwe's access to balance-of-payments support and development finance. In 1999, the IMF and the World Bank restricted Zimbabwe's access to key development financing by suspending adjustment lending (Douhan, 2022). The IMF subsequently suspended Zimbabwe's access to its General Resources Account in 2001 (IMF, 2001), and in 2003 further withdrew all technical assistance and suspended the country's voting rights (IMF, 2003). Similarly, the World Bank terminated its lending programme to Zimbabwe in 2002. The International Finance Corporation (IFC) also suspended funding for infrastructure and private sector projects, citing arrears and sanctions (RBZ, 2007). Efforts by the AfDB to support Zimbabwe's debt and arrears clearance in 2017 were constrained by the ZIDERA Act, which introduced the risk of sanctions against the Bank should it approve any form of debt forgiveness (Mujana and Sonan, 2025).

The United States further expanded its unilateral sanctions regime under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) and the National Emergencies Act (NEA), issuing a series of Executive Orders. In March 2003, the United States intensified its unilateral sanctions through Executive Order 13288, under which Zimbabwe was declared a national emergency and characterised as an "unusual and extraordinary threat to the foreign policy of the United States" (OFAC, 2013:3). As a result, 80 individuals were listed on the sanctions list, which included state owned parastatals in strategic sectors of the economy as well as government officials, banks, private companies and individuals accused of supporting the government of Zimbabwe. Matinyarare (2021) argues that the primary objective of this Executive Order was to prohibit designated entities from transacting with United States companies and to isolate Zimbabwe from the global economy. The scope of sanctions was subsequently expanded in November 2005 and July 2008 through Executive Orders 13391 and 13469, respectively, increasing the number of designated entities to 87 in 2005 and 144 in 2008 (Matinyarare, 2021).

It is worth noting that a significant shift has occurred in the United States' unilateral sanctions regime against Zimbabwe. In March 2024, the United States issued Executive Order 14118, which revoked the sanctions imposed under the IEEPA and the NEC Act, namely Executive Orders 13288, 13391 and 13469. These heavy sanctions were replaced by a more limited set under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Global Sanctions, 2025). Under the revised regime, sanctions currently apply to 11 individuals and three entities (US Department of the Treasury, 2024). In parallel, in September 2024, a formal legislative process to repeal sanctions imposed under the ZIDERA Act was introduced in the United States Congress. This development potentially opens avenues for debt and arrears clearance and renewed access to international finance from IFIs (Scoones, 2025). This shift reflects the limited effectiveness of the sanctions regime in producing the intended political change in Zimbabwe over the past

two decades (Chakawa, 2023; Ndakaripa, 2021). In addition, Zimbabwe's growing strategic importance, particularly its emergence as the world's fourth-largest producer of lithium ore, has heightened its relevance to the United States' strategy amid competition with China for resources (Ray and Walsh, 2024).

Afreximbank's Engagement with Sanctioned Zimbabwe

The empirical analysis section is anchored by the conceptualised dual continuum framework of MFIs as 'enablers' or 'mitigators' functions within a sanction regime. For each Afreximbank engagement with sanctioned Zimbabwe, the analysis considers not only the financing provided, but also whether the timing, terms, sectoral targeting and crisis context are consistent with the confirming indicators for a mitigating role. Zimbabwe experienced severely limited access to development finance, investment and trade finance during the Western unilateral sanctions period. International capital fled the country due to perceived high credit and country risks. Reflecting on sanctions' constraints on investments, Mujana and Sonan's (2025) study found that the EU's investments in the first decade of the sanctions averaged USD 24.3 million and declined by approximately 65.8% to an average of USD 8.3 million per year from 2010 to 2016. Following a similar pattern, the United States' investments declined from a historic high of USD 70 million in 1996 to USD 8 million in 2004 (Mujana and Sonan, 2025). The Western unilateral sanctions left Zimbabwe with limited access to development finance, investment, trade finance, and a stagnant banking sector, with credit to the private sector. While domestic governance failures, fiscal mismanagement and monetary instability also contributed independently to Zimbabwe's economic deterioration during this period, the withdrawal of external financing channels created financial gaps that Afreximbank subsequently sought to address.

In this context, the paper examines Afreximbank's engagement with Zimbabwe. The RBZ Governor, Dr John Mangudya, reflecting on Zimbabwe's engagement with Afreximbank, explicitly stated:

"African Export-Import Bank came into existence at the right time, at the turn of the century, soon after the suspension of balance of payments support to Zimbabwe for new and ongoing projects by most multilateral and bilateral creditors... Afreximbank has steadfastly stood by Zimbabwe throughout, with a determination to ensure that the essential trade needs of the country are met. We are indeed grateful for this unique relationship with this great African institution" (Mangudya, as cited in The Herald, 2017, para. 19, 21).

Afreximbank's engagement with Zimbabwe aligns with the study's conceptual framework on the conditions under which MFIs operate and the 'mitigators' of Western unilateral sanctions. The framework demonstrated that MFIs' functional role is primarily shaped by the nature of the sanction regime. As indicated, unilateral sanctions generate greater institutional and normative discretion, creating space for mitigating responses.



Under such conditions, MFIs may assume a mitigative role by deploying alternative financing instruments, leveraging institutional flexibility and providing targeted developmental support to cushion sanctions-induced economic disruptions in the affected state. The extent of MFIs' agency is further conditioned by the identity of the sanctioning country and the degree of legal, regulatory and reputational risk to which the institution is exposed.

In this light, Afreximbank, on risk disclosures related to sanctioned jurisdictions in its Base Offering Memorandums, explicitly states that it engages with African states subject to sanctions, including Zimbabwe, as part of its core mission to develop and finance trade across the African continent and only adheres to applicable sanctions while managing related risks (African Export-Import Bank, 2016, 2024, 2025c). Afreximbank asserts its agency as a treaty-based supranational African financial institution by exercising operational discretion and avoiding the automatic extraterritorial application of unilateral sanctions. In this way, Afreximbank functions as a 'mitigator' of the financial exclusion caused by Western unilateral sanctions against Zimbabwe by providing financing and investments.

Afreximbank has been utilising its newly acquired economic and financial capabilities to develop active financial and monetary programmes to advance Zimbabwe's development during the period of sanctions. Afreximbank has deployed a range of innovative trade finance, development finance and crisis-response instruments to support Zimbabwe's economy. These include lines of credit, direct financing, project finance, export development, asset-backed lending, country programme, syndication programme and guarantee programme.

The Afreximbank Country Programme

Since the imposition of Western unilateral sanctions, Afreximbank has deployed three country programmes for Zimbabwe. The country programme is an innovative financial vehicle that combines the Bank's product menu to assist its member states in confronting economic challenges (African Export-Import Bank, 2017). To be specific, in the case of Zimbabwe, the Bank indicated that: "During the country's isolation period and associated economic challenges, when multilateral engagement from the Western World was stalled, Afreximbank stepped in with a Country Programme worth about US\$1 billion to assist in rebuilding the economy" (African Export-Import Bank, 2017, p.4).

In 2001, Afreximbank launched the first Afreximbank country programme for Zimbabwe, soon after the imposition of Western economic sanctions. The main objective was to mitigate the impact of sanctions on the economy, particularly the withdrawal of international capital. The country programme was designed as a vehicle for short-term financing to enable Zimbabwe to import critical food and energy. According to Kamau (2014), one of the specific objectives of the country programme was to mitigate the threat to Zimbabwe's gold exports by trading it for oil from major oil producers on the continent.

The country programme served as an innovative financial vehicle that combined a wide variety of the Bank's product offerings, including lines of credit, export financing and project financing. According to Kamau (2014), the key facilities designed under this country programme included the Grain Import Financing Facility (GIFF) worth USD 25 million, the Gold Export Backed Financing Facility (GEBFF) worth USD 35 million and the Revolving Import/Export Relay Trade Financing Facility (RIERTF) worth USD 100 million. These facilities were disbursed to Zimbabwean banks that were facing challenges accessing international capital due to sanctions. The country programme was of great assistance to a country confronting peculiar difficulties requiring special solutions. According to the African Export-Import Bank report (2012), the first country programme was a success, as it mitigated the economic challenges caused by the Western unilateral sanctions and ensured the availability of food and petroleum products.

Following this success, Afreximbank introduced the second country programme, Enhanced Financing Facility (EFF), in 2008 to address structural challenges facing the country (African Export-Import Bank report, 2012). For instance, by mid-year 2008, the official inflation rate reported by the government reached 281 million %. Independent financial analysts estimated that inflation reached a record-breaking 79billion % by November 2008, while the IMF estimated a staggering 500 billion % in September 2008 (Simpson and Hawkins, 2018). To that end, the facility rolled out USD 150 million in minerals export-backed financing, USD 100 million in grain and oil import financing, and a revolving guarantee worth USD 50 million to support migrant remittances and diaspora (Kamau, 2014).

Afreximbank strengthened the second country programme by committing USD 100 million under the Zimbabwe Economic and Trade Revival Facility (ZETRF) in 2011 to support SMEs with much-needed capital for the expansion of their production (African Export-Import Bank report, 2012). Zimbabwean companies' loan inflows had sharply declined from an average of USD 480 million in the 1990s to an average of USD 80 million from 2000 to 2008 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, 2019). According to Dube et al. (2013), the ZETRF facility proved critical in assisting the manufacturing sector by providing the much-needed funding for the procurement of raw materials and the refurbishment of dilapidated machinery.

In 2014, Zimbabwe faced a severe currency crisis that threatened the financial sector, weakening banks and other financial institutions already under strain from sanctions. For instance, numerous banks, including Agribank, ZB Bank, Scotfin and Intermarket Holdings, had been placed under direct sanctions. According to the RBZ, since 2000, at least 102 correspondent banking relationships have been lost due to sanctions and the country's perceived high risk (Business Weekly, 2021). Most banking institutions' external financial transactions were intercepted for violating OFAC sanctions. For instance, OFAC seized over USD 20 million of Industrial Development Corporation of Zimbabwe (IDCZ) between 2008 and 2013 (Murwira, 2013). Barclays Bank paid a USD 5 million fine to the United States Treasury after processing transactions for IDCZ between 2008 and 2013 (Chitiyo et al., 2016).

In the context of this heightened currency and banking crisis, Afreximbank developed the USD 100 million Afreximbank Trade Debt-Backed Securities (AFTRADES) facility, which sought to rescue the Zimbabwean banking sector from collapse by providing the financial industry with much-needed liquidity (Kamau, 2014). The facility was designed to assist Zimbabwe's banks during the currency crisis by promoting interbank transactions (Awani and Chihota, 2019). The facility promoted interbank dealing by providing debt securities that served as collateral for interbank funds (African Export-Import Bank, 2014).

Zimbabwe has maintained its position as the third-largest recipient of Afreximbank's products and services (African Export-Import Bank, 2017). In the same vein, the Japan Credit Rating Agency (JCR) revealed that the top five clients of Afreximbank include Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Egypt, Tunisia and Angola, accounting for 71% of its total loans (JCR cited in Business Daily Zimbabwe, 2025). Therefore, the Afreximbank has played a significant role in mitigating the impact of sanctions by supporting infrastructure development, financial institutions, and the agriculture, trade finance, manufacturing and hospitality sectors, among others (African Export-Import Bank, 2017).

Year	Products / Facility	Millions (USD)	Beneficiary	Goal
1. Line of Credit Programme				
2015	Long-term loan facility	150	ZETDC	For ZETDC to settle outstanding debts to secure energy imports
2016	Line of Credit	40	NMBZ Bank	SMEs financing
2017	Line of Credit agreement	600	RBZ	To support RBZ Trade-related financing
2024	Line of Credit	80	CBZ Bank	Capacitate the Bank to finance SMEs
2025	SME credit line finance facility	10	CBZ Bank	Factoring and supply chain finance credit line for SMEs
2025	Fertiliser supply facility	125	Mutapa Investment Fund	To support fertiliser production and supply
2. Direct Financing Programme				
2021	Multiple financing agreements	188.6	ZETDC, CABS Bank, CBZ Bank, ZB Bank	The financing agreements targeting infrastructure, energy and industry finance
2023	Government loan	400	Government of Zimbabwe	Budget support and trade-related infrastructure
3. Project Financing Programme				

2014	ZETDC equipment	power	35	ZETDC	Import prepaid metres equipment
2025	Lake Kariba 1 GW floating solar project prep		4.4	Green Hybrid Power Pvt Ltd	Feasibility and bankability studies for the project
2025	ZESA infrastructure and imports	power	210	ZESA/ZETDC	Infrastructure upgrades, as well as electricity imports
2025	Mutapa Investment Fund project framework		50	Mutapa Investment Fund	Project preparation.
4. Asset-Backed Lending					
2014	AFTRADES Debt-Backed Securities	Trade	100	Government of Zimbabwe	Collateralised trade receivable securities
5. Export Development Programme					
2023	Accession to Fund for Export Development in Africa (FEDA)	-		Multilateral development platform.	To enable future export and industrial investment financing.
6. Syndication Programme					
2014	Bank term loan	syndicated	60	FBC Bank	liquidity and expansion

Figure 3: Snapshot of Afreximbank's products and facilities for Zimbabwe Source: Author synthesis from various sources (African Export-Import Bank, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2022, 2025a, 2025b; AllAfrica, 2025; Ecofin Agency, 2025; NewsDay, 2025; Business Daily, 2025; Reuters, 2021; Sandu, 2025a, 2025b; The Financial Gazette, 2025).

Figure 3 provides a snapshot of the products and facilities beyond the country programme that Afreximbank has made available to Zimbabwe during the sanctions period. The line of credit programme provides loan and guarantee facilities to various sectors to address financial liquidity shortages. Notable lines of credit include a USD 600 million line of credit extended to the RBZ in 2017 (African Export-Import Bank, 2017). The key goal was to support the RBZ's ability to finance trade-related transactions and projects. Highlighting the strategic importance of Afreximbank, Finance Minister Mthuli Ncube noted that it had provided a combined USD 1.4 billion over just two months between 2017 and 2019 (Reuters, 2021).

The direct financing programme is a flagship financial tool of Afreximbank, enabling the Bank to finance companies' pre- and post-export activities and trade-related facilities (African Export-Import Bank, 2025d). Notably, the Bank extended multiple direct

financings to corporations totalling USD 188.6 million in 2021. The direct funding was to assist Zimbabwean corporations with liquidity to increase their capacity, thereby contributing to the economy. Among the beneficiaries was CBZ bank, which was still recovering from the USD 3.8 billion fine imposed by OFAC in 2017, later reduced to USD 385 million, for facilitating transactions on behalf of ZB bank, which was under sanctions (Matinyarare, 2021).

On the other hand, the project financing programme has also been critical in financing the energy sector, which had been negatively affected by the flight of international capital since the imposition of unilateral sanctions. It was exacerbated by the withdrawal of the World Bank credit lines and financial support for energy infrastructure development programmes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, 2019). Therefore, Afreximbank's support to the Zimbabwe Electricity Transmission and Distribution Company (ZETDC) has been significant in addressing the energy infrastructure financing gap created by the withdrawal of World Bank development financing. In 2025, Afreximbank extended another USD 210 million to assist ZETDC with power infrastructure upgrades and electricity imports (Sandu, 2025b).

Figure 4 illustrates the cumulative trajectory of Afreximbank's financial engagement with Zimbabwe by programme type across the sanctions period.

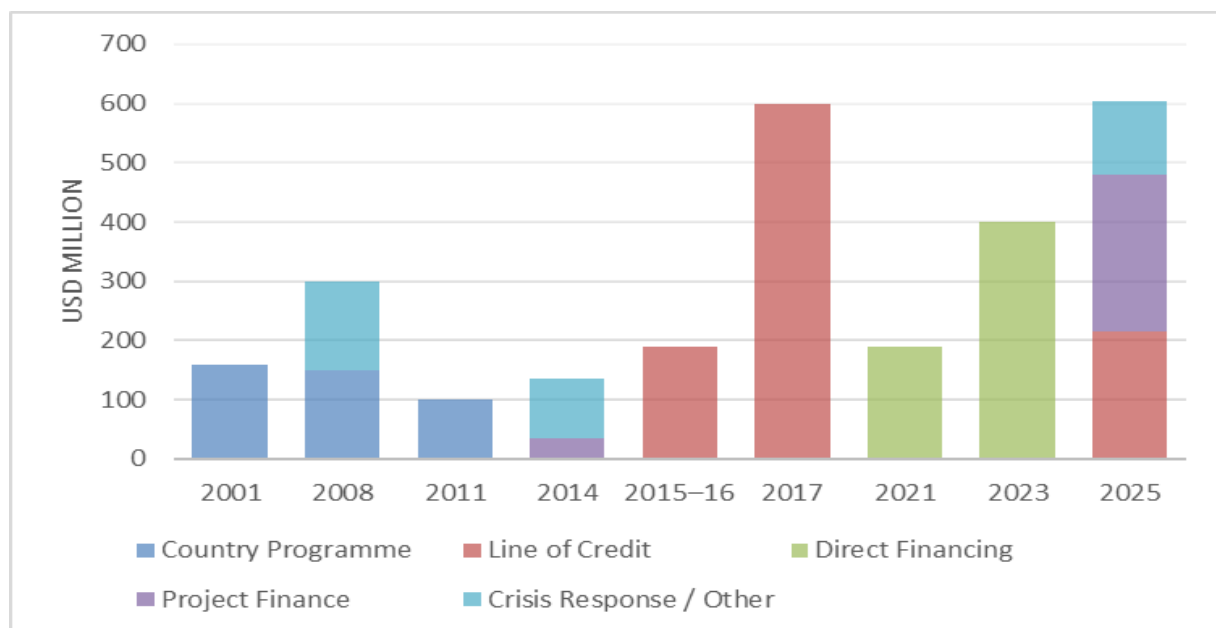


Figure 4: Afreximbank's products and facilities for Zimbabwe, 2001-2025. Source: Author synthesis from various sources (African Export-Import Bank, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2022, 2025a, 2025b; AllAfrica, 2025; Ecofin Agency, 2025; NewsDay, 2025; Business Daily, 2025; Reuters, 2021; Sandu, 2025a, 2025b; The Financial Gazette, 2025).

The Impact of Afreximbank's Engagement on Zimbabwe's Economy amid Western Unilateral Sanctions

The empirical record discussed in the above section, depicted in Figure 3 and Figure 4 of Afreximbank's engagement with Zimbabwe, reveals significant developmental benefits during the period of Western unilateral sanctions. First, Afreximbank mitigated the financing gap created by the withdrawal of the Bretton Woods institutions, the suspension of Western bilateral development finance and the collapse of international private capital flows. For instance, the EU's average annual investment in Zimbabwe during the early sanctions period fell to USD 8.3 million per year between 2010 and 2016. On the other hand, the United States investment declined from USD 70 million in 1996 to USD 8 million in 2004 (Mujana and Sonan, 2025). In this light, Afreximbank's USD 600 million line of credit to the RBZ in 2017 alone dwarfed the combined Western investment inflows of the preceding decade. Therefore, Afreximbank has facilitated the much-needed development finance and investment in Zimbabwe during the sanctioned period. Afreximbank's financial innovations and facilities enabled Zimbabwe to build resilience and develop adaptive strategies that softened the impact of Western unilateral sanctions.

Second, Afreximbank's engagement helped stabilise the banking sector. According to Awani and Chihota (2019), the AFTRADES facility, valued at USD 100 million, was a huge success, as it resuscitated the interbank market, thereby averting a currency and banking crisis. In addition, the facility restored confidence in the banking sector by stabilising it and contributing to the restoration of the lender of last resort status to the RBZ (Awani and Chihota, 2019). In 2015, the Trade Finance Magazine named the AFTRADES facility 'Deal of the Year' for its innovation and uniqueness (Awani and Chihota, 2019).

Third, Afreximbank's project financing for energy and infrastructure projects had a significant impact, sustaining power infrastructure development in the absence of World Bank credit lines (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, 2019). As indicated in Figure 3, Afreximbank's project financing to ZETDC includes a USD 35 million facility in 2014, USD 188.6 million in multiple financing agreements in 2021 and USD 210 million in 2025. Lastly, Afreximbank's trade finance preserved Zimbabwe's essential trade flows during the sanctions-induced financial isolation. Afreximbank's financial innovations and facilities enabled Zimbabwe to build resilience and develop adaptive strategies that softened the impact of Western economic sanctions. Therefore, in line with the conceptual framework of this paper, Afreximbank played a mitigating role by deploying alternative financing instruments, leveraging institutional flexibility and providing targeted developmental support to cushion sanctions-induced economic disruptions in Zimbabwe.

While Afreximbank's engagement with Zimbabwe has largely been positive, one can not ignore the risks and drawbacks associated with the relationship. There is significant concern about Zimbabwe's over-reliance on a single multilateral institution, as it is consistently one of Afreximbank's top five clients (JCR cited in Business Daily Zimbabwe,



2025). This institutional over-dependence creates systemic vulnerability that could expose Zimbabwe to acute financing shocks with limited alternatives. In addition, despite the scale of Afreximbank's interventions, they do not fully address Zimbabwe's developmental financing requirements. On the other hand, Afreximbank has assumed significant reputational and regulatory risks by engaging with Zimbabwe, as indicated in its Base Offering Memorandums.

Conclusion

The paper demonstrates that emerging Pan-African MFIs, particularly Afreximbank, have developed the institutional capacity to respond to Western unilateral sanctions by providing alternative development and trade finance to affected member states. Contributing to the diversification of Africa's post-colonial financial architecture beyond its dependence on Western-dominated multilateral institutions. Afreximbank deployed a range of innovative trade, development and crisis-response instruments to support Zimbabwe's economy during the period of Western unilateral sanctions. These include lines of credit, direct financing, project finance, export development, asset-backed lending, country programme, syndication programme and guarantee programme. Afreximbank's provision of crucial development finance and investments to Zimbabwe showcases its agency in the global financial landscape. The paper contributes to the sanctions literature by introducing Pan-African MFIs as under-theorised actors in unilateral sanctions regimes. Practically, the findings suggest that strengthening Pan-African MFIs may reduce African countries' vulnerability to Western unilateral sanctions and external shocks.

While this paper offers new insights into the engagement of Pan-African MFIs with African countries under Western unilateral economic sanctions, it also has certain limitations. The paper relies on a single case of Afreximbank's engagement with Zimbabwe, which may limit the generalisability of its findings. Limited financial data also constrain the depth of analysis, as sanctions constrain reporting. The paper's reliance on institutional announced and committed facility data means its findings establish the provision of alternative finance rather than its development impact. Future research can build on this foundation by exploring multiple case studies of Afreximbank's engagement with African countries under Western economic sanctions, enabling a more robust comparative analysis. In addition, future research could adopt quantitative econometric methods to assess Afreximbank's impact on the Zimbabwean economy and use primary data, including interviews with key informants from Afreximbank officials, government and beneficiary institutions, to substantiate the claims made in this paper. Despite these limitations, the paper provides a valuable starting point for understanding the growing African agency in the global financial landscape, as evidenced by Afreximbank's active capacity to design financial alternatives to traditional Bretton Woods institutions.

Conflict of Interest

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

Notes on Contributor

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The Third Space of Conversion: Selective Cultural Brokerage and the Historical Reconstitution of Tradition Among the Atswean-Asi (A Kuteb Subgroup) in Taraba State, Nigeria¹

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Abstract:

This study is an exploration of the cultural and traditional practices of the Atswean-Asi people of Kwambai, a distinct subgroup of the Kuteb ethnic group in Taraba State, Nigeria. It interrogates the continuity and transformation of practices such as child-naming ceremonies, menstrual segregation, male circumcision, and associated taboos in the face of external influences. The main argument is that the interaction between Christianity, modernity, and indigenous practices has led to a lively mix of cultures. This has created a 'Third Space' for expression that helps maintain community identity through Selective Cultural Brokerage. The objective is to historicise and analyse these cultural practices within their socio-political and spiritual frameworks, utilising the Theory of Cultural Hybridity to interpret the data as evidence of active cultural resilience rather than passive reception. The study adopts the historical method, relying on oral traditions, ethnographic observation, and documentary sources. The paper concludes that these traditions are being restructured in a focused way. This gives us a new theoretical idea: Selective Cultural Brokerage. Community leaders work together to manage the rules of cultural continuity, which helps maintain the stability of a new, hybrid communal identity.

Keywords:

Kuteb; Atswean-Asi; Cultural Hybridity; Selective Cultural Brokerage; Cultural Reconstitution.

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1. Introduction

The clash of native African culture and the agents of Christian modernity is one of the main areas of interest in the anthropology of religion as to how the local population copes with the tension between the traditional beliefs and new religions (Peel, 2016 & Sanneh, 1989). This relationship has been discussed in many terms of cultural erasure, where the missionary influence and western education was perceived as an unavoidable acculturation instrument (Smith, 1972). But, the modern history of the Atswean Asi (subgroup of the Kuteb people in Taraba State) indicates a still more subtle fact. Although missionary activity reached Kuteb land as early as 1915, the culture change was not a docile submission but a bargaining process. The use of agency by indigenous communities in the reconstruction of their traditions instead of just submitting to foreign religious domination is a pressing need to research.

In this paper, the analytic focus of the study is the Third Space of Enunciation, which is a concept applied in the post-colonial theory to define the in-between space in which the tradition and modernity intersect to establish new identities (Bhabha, 1994). Selective Cultural Brokerage is, in this context, the particular administrative and spiritual process that is employed to manoeuvre through this space. Selective Cultural Brokerage is, in this context, an institutional convergence between the traditional political council (Be Kwe) and the leadership of the Reformed Church of Christ for Nations (RCCN), in contrast to the classical model, which assumes that individual gatekeepers operate independently (Wolf, 1956 & Geertz, 1960). The view of the church as a co-governor of tradition would enable one to further see how cultural hybridity is an artificialised and produced effect and not an unintended by-product of history.

Past research on Kuteb has been mostly limited to general linguistic evaluations, missionary history, or description of wedding celebrations (Smith, 1972, Ejwocwu, 2000, Ukwon, 2023 & Ukwon, 2014). While these studies provide valuable historical data, they often overlook the specific institutional negotiations that occur within subgroups, such as the Atswean Asi. The current literature on religious syncretism in Africa has given much attention to the adaptations at the individual level but does not critically analyse the negotiated tradition which are run by formal councils. As an example, when missionary reports stress the loss of traditional rites, they do not pay much attention to the symbolic synthesis in the naming ceremonies or the institutional heterogeneity that is performed during the official 2010 marriage reforms. This negligence about the corporate agency of indigenous leaders characterises the research gap that is critical, and that is filled in the current study. This research addresses the specified gap, as it embraces a qualitative research method based on historical inquiry to investigate the way Atswean Asi people apply the Selective Cultural Brokerage process to reconstruct their identity. Basing the study on the theory of cultural hybridity, the community is viewed as a proactive designer of the Third Space, which provides the space with the furnishings in the form of a rational and well-organised selection scheme.

The emphasis on the Reformed Church of Christ for Nations (RCCN) is not coincidental. The RCCN has been the most prominent Christian denomination among

the Kuteb people since the advent of Christianity in the region, and the overwhelming majority of Christians are members of RCCN. Its impact is not just religious, but also social, as it was used to regulate social institutions and customs. The effectiveness of this was shown in the joint deliberations of the RCCN leadership and the Be Kwe (traditional council) in 2010 that resulted in agreed reforms to Kuteb marriage practices. The RCCN, as a demographic majority and a partner of the traditional authorities, offers the best case study to explore Christian institutions' role in the selective reconstruction of Kuteb cultural practices.

In the current study, the discussion of how certain practices such as marriage reforms, naming practices, and moralisation of menstrual taboos were transitioned goes to show that, conversion is an authored cultural production (Peel, 2016). The situation of the study puts the Kuteb identity survival in terms of world Christianity. This study is relevant to anthropological studies as it re-establishes the context of religious conversion as an institutional brokerage. Theoretically, it expands the debate on hybridity, demonstrating the fact that it is the Third Space that is being controlled by corporate forces and not by urgent personal decisions. It provides some special information on the Atswean Asi subgroup, recording the strength of their ontological needs through modernising pressures. Lastly, the research comes up with a historical reconstitution model that validates the existence of indigenous agency, which is an essential move towards comprehending how African communities maintain cultural specifics and also become part of the world communities.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Evolution of Cultural Brokerage

The idea of cultural brokerage is a landmark structure of examining the relationships between local societies and large foreign institutions. The original definition of the cultural broker was given by Eric Wolf (1956), who explained such players as nation-oriented individuals who lie in important links between local village institutions and national or international systems which are called synapses. In this classical approach, the role of the broker is as a gatekeeper, who coordinates information and resources in bringing members of the community to a larger political economy and at the same time provides internal social order.

Clifford Geertz (1960) applied this framework of analysis into the religious context in his work on the Javanese *kijaji*. Geertz demonstrated that the role of religious scholars was not only that of spiritual leaders but cultural interlocutors, who facilitated the process of importing Islamic values into local settings. He illustrated that brokerage is a severely symbolic process of translation, whereby the external worldviews are restructured into a language that the local people can embrace without necessarily losing their main identity. Despite developing quite strong frameworks on the way to approach cultural mediation, Wolf and Geertz focused mostly on the agency of individual agents, i.e. the role of the village chief or the individual scholar as the mediator between two different worlds.



The modern reality of the Atswean-Asi is such that it requires the break with this individualistic emphasis. J.D.Y. Peel (2016) presents a needed addition to the classical theory of brokerage by claiming that religious conversion in Nigeria could hardly be a passive state of being subject to the external hegemony. Rather, Peel defines conversion as an act of cultural making which is self-determined. In this view, this contact between indigenous traditions and Christian structures is seen as an authored reconstruction of the social world. According to the framework by Peel, communities do not take a new faith as a finished product and impose it onto the community; instead, they use it as a tool to cope with the pressures of a constantly changing present.

This research expounds on the observation of Peel to explain that brokerage in Kwambai and Kuteb land has transformed into a corporate institutional project. The traditional council (the Be - Kwe) along with the church leadership (the RCCN) exist in a combined form rather than in an individual format. This is an institutional alliance that regulates the conditions of cultural continuity, so that which traditional institutions, like the need to protect a spirituality or the control of descent, are reconstructed in a Christian context, are determined. As a result, the study goes beyond the duality between cultural retention and loss. It conceptualises the resulting hybridity as a conscious, written experience whereby local institutions use the church to ensure the survival of local ethnic identity of Kuteb in a modernising world.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: The Third Space and Selective Cultural Brokerage

The spatial context for cultural evolution among the Atswean Asi is best situated within Homi Bhabha's (1994) conceptualisation of the Third Space of Enunciation. Bhabha describes this space as a liminal or in between location where the rigid binaries of tradition and modernity are collapsed through the process of cultural interaction. Within this framework, Selective Cultural Brokerage functions as the active mechanism of translation that navigates this liminality and manages the inherent ambivalence of the post colonial condition. While Bhabha identifies the space, the presence of institutional brokers explains the administrative logic that furnishes it. This process reflects Peel's (2016) observation that religious conversion acts as a self determined project of making, where the community does not merely inhabit a hybrid space but actively authors its contents.

I define Selective Cultural Brokerage as the deliberate, corporate management of tradition by an alliance of indigenous political structures and religious institutions. Unlike the individual brokers described by Wolf (1956) or Geertz (1960), brokerage in Kwambai is an institutional process involving a collaborative effort between the Be Kwe (the traditional council of elders) and the leadership of the Reformed Church of Christ for Nations (RCCN). This brokerage represents a significant performance of agency that rejects the notion of cultural erasure. Rather than a passive reception of external norms, the community engages in what Bhabha describes as a disruptive hybridity that allows the Atswean Asi to author a new social script.

The community utilises the church to secure the continuity of ancient ontological needs, such as spiritual protection and lineage stability, while simultaneously adopting the administrative and moral forms of Christian modernity. This theoretical model posits that cultural hybridity is not an accidental byproduct of history but a manufactured outcome. The leaders of the community actively select which elements of the past are compatible with the future through a selection process that is rational and systematic. This involves discarding practices deemed obsolete, modifying others to fit Christian ethics, and canonising those that are essential for Kuteb identity. Consequently, Selective Cultural Brokerage is not a sign of identity confusion but a sophisticated project of historical reconstitution. It ensures that the resulting hybridity is a deliberate and authored outcome, where the community remains traditionally anchored even as they are modernly oriented.

2.3 Operationalising the Theory

The validity of Selective Cultural Brokerage as a theoretical tool is empirically grounded in the historical events of the community, most notably the cultural legislation enacted in 2010. This event serves as the primary case study for the theoretical argument of this paper. In October 2010, the Be-Kwe and the RCCN leadership under the guidance of Rev. Risae Yakubu Shamaki convened a formal deliberative assembly to reconstitute the laws of marriage and bride price (Reformed Church of Christ for Nations [RCCN] & Be Kwe Council, 2010; Shamaki, 2022). This event demonstrates that the church in Kuteb land has evolved beyond the role of a missionary antagonist to become a "co-governor" of tradition. Pegging the bride price at fifty thousand naira and codifying the specific items required for the ceremony has demonstrated the capacity of the church and the traditional council to have acted as a corporate brokerage firm. They did not abolish the traditional payment, which would have signaled a total break with the ancestors, nor did they allow the price to float freely, which would have succumbed to the capitalist pressures of the modern economy. Instead, they brokered a middle ground that satisfied the requirement for traditional legitimacy while adhering to the Christian and economic imperatives of the present day.

Therefore, this study moves beyond the narrative of cultural loss. The utilisation of the framework of Selective Cultural Brokerage in the following sections will demonstrate that the Atswean-Asi are engaged in a sophisticated project of historical reconstitution. They are using the institutions of the church and the traditional council to navigate Bhabha's Third Space, ensuring that their identity remains distinct even as it transforms. This approach offers a significant theoretical contribution to the anthropology of religion in Africa by shifting the focus from individual syncretism to institutional agency.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative historical inquiry method, designed to reconstruct the social history of the Atswean-Asi people through the triangulation of oral traditions, ethnographic observation, and text analysis. The primary objective of this design was to move beyond a static description of cultural traits and instead capture the dynamic process of cultural negotiation described in the theoretical framework. Treating culture as a "lived experience" rather than a fixed object allows for an investigation into how the community actively manages the tension between Kuteb tradition and Christian modernity.

3.2 Study Area and Population

The research was primarily conducted in Kwambai (Atswean-Asi), located in the Yangtu Development Area of Taraba State, Nigeria. Supplementary data were collected in Takum and Wukari, where significant diaspora populations of Atswean-Asi reside. The study population was stratified to include three distinct categories of actors essential to the "brokerage" process: traditional political leaders (*Be-Kwe*), religious clergy from the Reformed Church of Christ for Nations (RCCN), and lay community elders. This stratification ensured that the data reflected the perspectives of both the custodians of tradition and the agents of change.

3.3 Data Collection Strategies

Data collection was executed between December 2021 and March 2022. The study utilised three primary instruments:

- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** The dataset was generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively selected "culture bearers". The sampling technique was non-probabilistic and purposive, targeting individuals known for their encyclopaedic knowledge of Atswean and Kuteb history. Key interlocutors included Prince Anderi Andeshara (a royal prince), Rev. Risae Yakubu Shamaki (RCCN Clergy), Rimamshong Yashe (Traditional Council Member in Kwambai) and Jerusha D. (Women Leader). The interview protocol focused on three thematic pillars: the origins of specific rites (such as *Suwa* and *Iki-fen*), the timeline of their decline or modification, and the rationale behind the acceptance of the 2010 marriage reforms.
- **Ethnographic Observation:** To supplement oral accounts, the researcher engaged in direct participant observation of contemporary cultural life. This included attending child-naming ceremonies and observing the interactions during traditional council meetings. These observations provided "thick description" of how hybrid practices, such as the use of the palm leaf alongside Christian prayer, are enacted in real-time.

- Archival and Documentary Analysis: Oral data were corroborated with documentary evidence to minimise memory bias. Key documents included the written resolutions of the 2010 Joint Meeting between the *Be-Kwe* and RCCN leadership, as well as historical missionary records and colonial intelligence reports cited in established literature (e.g., Smith, 1972; Mgbe, 1981).

3.4 Reflexivity and Positionality

A critical component of this methodology is the positionality of the author as a native member of the Atswean-Asi community. In anthropological terms, this study is conducted from an "indigenous insider" perspective. This status provided significant advantages, primarily in the form of linguistic fluency (Kuteb) and access to restricted sacred knowledge that would be inaccessible to an outsider. However, the author acknowledges the risk of "familiarity blindness" that is, the tendency to overlook patterns that appear ordinary to a local but are analytically significant. To mitigate this bias and ensure critical distance, the study employed a strategy of "estrangement", consciously treating familiar rituals as strange data points requiring explanation. Furthermore, the interpretation of the data was subjected to peer debriefing with academic colleagues outside the Kuteb ethnic group to ensure that the theory of "Selective Cultural Brokerage" was grounded in empirical evidence rather than assumed cultural knowledge.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data obtained from the field were analysed using a thematic analysis framework. Recorded interviews were transcribed and coded to identify recurring patterns regarding cultural modification. Codes were generated around key concepts such as "abandonment" (e.g., the menstrual hut), "modification" (e.g., circumcision timing), "monetisation" (e.g., bride price), and "symbolic retention" (e.g., the palm leaf). These codes were then synthesised to construct the argument of institutional brokerage, demonstrating how specific decisions led to the formation of the "Third Space".

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research. Informed consent was obtained verbally from all interlocutors. The purpose of the study was explained in the local dialect, and participants were assured that their historical narratives would be treated with respect. In cases where sensitive information regarding sacred rites was shared, permission was explicitly sought to reproduce these details in the scholarly record. The use of real names in this text was done with the express permission of the elders, who viewed the research as a means of preserving their legacy for future generations.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Brief Historical Context of the Atswean- Asi (Kwambai)

The history of the migration and settlement of the Atswean-Asi people is controversial, this is because the history of the people is based on oral traditions. Although these controversies exist, there is uniformity in the oral traditions that the first people to settle at the Atswean-Asi Mountain are the Nya sub-clan in Kwambai. It is imperative to adumbrate that the Atswean people are a mixture of different Kuteb clans who all came together to form the settlement known as Kwambai (Atswean-Asi). Oral history, as narrated by Dauda, has it that the Nya sub-clan in Atswean-Asi are descendants of a man from Bika. This man was said to have left Bika because he never wanted to partake in a war which was on-going. He decided to migrate out of Bika with his family to the Atswean-Asi Mountain and founded the Cwupwe-Nya on the mountain (Dauda, 2021). As time went on, he was joined by a man from Acha who founded the Nyisha sub-clan in Kwambai or Atswean-Asi. The man from Acha who came to found the Nyisha sub-clan was said to have left Acha because of a dispute. The Nyitsa sub-clan also joined from Kpambo to found the Cwupwe-Nyitsa. The Mbausa are said to have migrated from another clan in Bika. More so, the Risik sub-clan also came from Bika to found the Cwupwe-Risik. Nuswo and Metan sub-clan are said to have come from Fikyu. And then Mbarkan are said to have migrated from Rubur (Jenuwa) (Yohanna, 2021). From the above we could easily glean that Kwambai (Atswean-Asi) is made up of eight sub-clan which are Nya, Nyisha, Nyitsa, Risik, Mbausa, Nuswo, Metan, Mbarkan.

4.2 The Transformation of Religious and Social Institutions

4.2.1 From Iki-fen to the Church: The Shift in Spiritual Protection

One aspect of a people's culture and tradition is their religion. Before the advent of Christianity in Kwambai or Atswean-Asi, the people believed in the existence of a supernatural being called Rimam-Pupwen (the God of heaven). The Atswean-Asi held that this Rimam-Pupwen was responsible for their creation, and he reigned in their daily activities here on earth (Ukwen, 2014). To connect to this Supreme Being, the Atswean-Asi worshipped specific idols that they believed represented the invisible Rimam-Pupwen. It was these idols they worshipped and presented all their case or worries to, hence the idols are smaller gods or offspring of the Rimam-Pupwen. Some of these idols were owned by individuals or families, as the case might be. These smaller gods or idols worshipped by the people serve different or various purposes, which makes it possible for one to own more than one god or idol. One of the plethora of such gods or idols is the Iki-fen, which is seen as the god of the road. Iki-fen is responsible for safeguarding individuals from harm while on a journey. Oral information derived from Prince Anderi Andeshara shows that Iki-fen could even direct the path of an individual from an impending doom while on any journey. During our discussion, Prince Anderi Andeshara emphasised the protective agency of this deity, stating: "If a man is walking into danger,

Iki-fen will cloud the path or make his feet heavy so he cannot continue toward his death" (Andeshara, 2021).

There is also another god, which is called Ikir-kwen (mountain god). This god is worshipped and revered by all in the community because it is believed that when trouble ensues in the land, calling on Ikir-kwen will salvage the situation or problem. To connect to the Ikir-kwen, one will need the services of the Kukwen-rikwen (the priest). As a priest, he is a mediator between the people and the gods in the land. It was through the Kukwen-rikwen that the Ikir-kwen gave messages or instructions to the people in the land. The Ikir-kwen is usually given a yearly sacrifice of a human head to appease it for favour and supply, such as high yield in crops during a planting season and favourable rainfall. It is worth noting that any time there seems to be drought in the land, the Kukwen-rikwen will take with him some items, such as either goats or chickens, to the topmost part of the Atswean-Asi Mountain. After so many incantations, he will sacrifice the chicken or goat and then remove his shirt and raise it. Immediately this is done, rain will start to fall, which shows the potency of communication between the Kukwen-rikwen and the gods.

Significantly, the Kukwen-rikwen is the spiritual leader of the Atswean-Asi; as such, there are certain things based on traditions that he must observe. One of such is that the Kukwen-rikwen does not greet mortal men through a handshake; if one wants to greet the Kukwen-rikwen, he would have to tap his lap three times, and so also would the Kukwen-rikwen respond in the same manner. If the Kukwen-rikwen meets another Kukwen from another Kuteb community, he would greet him by turning the back of his palm and tapping it three times at the back of the other Kukwen's back of palm. Moreover, the Kukwen-rikwen does not eat from a plate but rather uses a calabash. Furthermore, the Kukwen-rikwen does not wear any other colour of cloth than black. Prior to the Atswean People starting to wear woven cloth, men usually wore animal skin, and so the Kukwen-rikwen also wears animal skin, but it undergoes a traditional dyeing process to darken the hide. This adherence to black attire is not merely aesthetic but ontological. As Rimamshong Yashe explained: "The black skin represents the heavy clouds of rain and the depth of the ancestors; for a priest to wear white or red is to invite drought and anger upon the community" (Yashe, 2021).

The transition from the traditional priesthood of the Kukwen-rikwen to the modern Christian clergy offers a critical insight into the mechanism of Selective Cultural Brokerage. While the overt worship of deities like Iki-fen and Ikir-kwen has declined, the data suggests that the community's ontological security, their deep-seated need for protection against the unknown, has not disappeared. Instead, it has undergone a process of functional substitution. The church leadership, acting as cultural brokers, did not merely erase the function of the Kukwen; they assumed it. Today, the prayers for journey mercies offered by the RCCN pastor serve the exact same sociological function as the sacrifices to Iki-fen. Similarly, the Harvest Thanksgiving and special fasting for rain have replaced the mountain sacrifices to Ikir-kwen. This demonstrates that the Third Space of conversion is not a vacuum where tradition is lost, but a hybrid space where



the forms of worship change, but the cultural logic remains intact. The Atswean-Asi have successfully negotiated a system where they can remain traditionally protected while being modernly Christian, proving that the brokers have managed to stabilise the community's identity by re-routing ancient fears through new, institutional channels.

4.2.2 Domestic Socialisation and Etiquette

Another aspect of the Atswean-Asi culture is the pattern to which children and youths are groomed to be responsible. In this sense, women are very instrumental to the early life of their children because of their biological attachment to their children. When a child is born and has begun his or her growth, it is the mother who teaches that child how to speak. As the child keeps growing, he or she is bequeathed with the norms and etiquette of Atswean. Such norms and etiquette include the manner in which the child should greet elders and respect constituted authorities. The child is also taught his or her role based on gender peculiarities (Araen, 2021). For instance, the male child is taught how to till the ground for planting, cutting down trees for the house for cooking purposes, how to hunt for bush meat, and other male-prescribed roles in Atswean-Asi. The theoretical knowledge is taught by the mothers, while the practical aspect is taught by fathers and other male figures in the family. For the female child, she is taught how to cook delicacies ranging from *itong tsiyae* (pumpkin leaf soup), *itong nasara* (moringa leaf soup), *itong bishi* (creeping jenny leaf soup), *pwa wura* (hibiscus leaf soup), among many others. The females are also inculcated with virtues to remain respectful, decent, and neat so that they will not bring shame and disgrace to their household.

In the Atswean-Asi culture, when food is served, everyone is expected to maintain decorum while eating. Such decorum that should be maintained is that no one is expected to make noise while eating, because food should be respected by all. More to that, while eating, no one is supposed to rush the food, especially if it is with elders (Mgbe, 1981). An elder is supposed to eat and remain food for the youngest person they are eating together, this is to show that he wants the younger person to also grow to adulthood and be responsible for other younger ones too. While eating, it is the youngest person who usually shares the meat, and then the most elderly person picks first, but in the case where food is to be shared, the most elderly person will share, and the youngest will pick first. More so, after eating, it is expected that the youngest will be the one to pack the plates. It is also in the culture of the Atswean-Asi people that even if a younger person is full while eating with an elderly person, he or she is not permitted to wash his hands except the older person has washed his or hers. This is done to instil discipline and respect in the minds of all to be conscious of their elders.

Unlike public rites like marriage or circumcision, these domestic practices of grooming and etiquette have remained largely resistant to "Brokerage." They exist in the private domain (Habitus), where the *Be-Kwe* and Church have less direct control. This suggests that while "institutional" culture is negotiated in the Third Space, "domestic" culture serves as a stable reservoir of Kuteb identity, preserved through the informal agency of mothers rather than formal decrees.

4.2.3 Marriage Rites

Marriage is another factor in the Atswean-Asi culture; marriage constitutes a union between a man and woman, including their families. In Atswean-Asi, when a female child is born, another parent who has a male child would get a bead known as Suwa and then take it to the newly born female child. The bead, which is in the form of a necklace, is placed on the neck of the female child to show that she has been betrothed to a man already. This is to avert any suitor from coming to do the same ritual with her again (Ukwen, 2023). Reflecting on the finality of this ritual, Emmanuel (2022) noted: "Once the Suwa was on her neck, that girl was no longer a child of her father alone; she was a wife-in-waiting. No other man would even look at her twice because the bead was a boundary". In some cases, it is the intending suitor who is already grown up who takes this bead to the newly born girl. Once the bead is placed on the baby's neck and some quantity of cigarettes is given to the baby's father, no one is permitted to ask for her hand in marriage because someone has shown interest and fulfilled the initial customary requirement. As the baby keeps growing, the family of the male child is expected to always fetch firewood for the intended bride so that they can use it to cook. Moreover, the male child's family is dutifully bound to farm for the parents of the girl child on an annual basis. In the eventuality that the male child is grown, he is expected to do this himself. Sometimes, he and his friends would engage in group farming for the family of his intended wife. He does this until his wife is attained marriageable age. When the lady is fully matured, the male figure will hunt for meat for his father-in-law, after which he does the same for his mother-in-law, and finally for the lady too. Again, he would have to produce about seven pots of locally brewed alcohol known as jwab for his in-laws. After this process is fulfilled, the lady will be released to the man, and he will bring her home. When she arrives at her husband's home, the man is not permitted to touch her unless she sleeps in her mother-in-law's room. If the young man has step-mothers, she must definitely sleep in their huts before the man comes to beg his mother and step-mother for the release of his wife to him. They will oblige, and the lady will be taken to his hut for him to have her all through (Emmanuel, 2022).

On the first night of their sexual intercourse, a white cloth is placed on their traditional bed made of wood to ratify if the lady is a virgin. If blood drops on the cloth, it is now confirmed that the lady is a virgin and she will be celebrated for maintaining decency, but if otherwise, she is considered morally compromised and that will bring disgrace to her parent, for they will be considered as incapable of grooming their child. It should be noted that the above scenario has been the norm; it was not until the transition to modernity that some of these practices are no longer tenable because of civilisation (Jerusha, 2022). Today, a lady ripe for marriage in Atswean-Asi can choose who gets married to her. But in distant time past, as long as the bead is placed on her neck while she is still a toddler, even if she grows up not to have emotional attachment with the man, she is under obligation to marry him, which is to say the females had no choice of who to marry.



With the coming of the colonialist and their agents (missionaries), some of these marriage rites have witnessed significant transformation from their organic state as it was in the precolonial times. Take for instance, the ritual of placing a suwa (bead necklace) on a newly born female child to be betrothed has become obsolete and no longer tenable. This practice did not decline at once; it was gradual. By the 1940s, Christianity had made a significant presence in Atswean-Asi (Kwambai), and a sizeable population of the people had adopted the Christian faith (Smith, 1972). Converts were taught to allow their daughters to choose their own life partners. The findings obtained during my fieldwork reveal that by the first decade of the 21st century, this practice had completely eroded in Atswean-Asi. Thus, one can safely arrive at the conclusion that Christianity and globalisation were powerful forces to have attracted this new transformation.

Another transformation in the marriage rites is hinged on the fact that some obligations that were hitherto expected by a suitor have changed. The practice of organising friends to farm for your intended in-laws or hunting for meat is not a necessity as it used to be. It is now something that can be done at will because modernity has set in, and many Atswean-Asi men do not reside in the village, but have taken to other professions in the city. There is a development that greatly impacted marital rites not just in Atswean-Asi but the whole of Kuteb land. In October 2010, a meeting was held by the Be-Kwe (council of Kuteb Village kings) and the leadership of the Reformed Church of Christ for Nations (RCCN) under Reverend Risae Yakubu Shamaki to discuss and agree on what should constitute marital rites in the whole of Kuteb land (RCCN & Be Kwe Council, 2010; Vanguard, November 2011). An interesting point to note is that over 90% of Kuteb Christians worship with RCCN, which explains why the church is meeting with Kuteb traditional rulers to modify some of these rites. After an exhaustive discussion, the pastors and traditional rulers came into agreement that bride price should be placed at N50,000 with items such as 6 bags of salt, 6 crates of carbonated drinks (1 Coke, 1 Fanta, 1 Sprite, and 3 Malt), N 5,000 for opening of in-law's mouth, N10,000 for washing of pot. Some other minor charges must not exceed N20,000 (RCCN & Be Kwe Council, 2010).

The decline of the suwa ritual is one example of the 'brokerage' process where a tradition was actively jettisoned as antithetical to the Christian emphasis on individual marital consent. More profoundly, the formal agreement between the traditional Be-Kwe (council of Kuteb Village kings) and the RCCN leadership in 2010 is a quintessential example of Institutional Hybridity. This negotiation did not eradicate customary law but rather stabilised it by creating a Hybrid Social Institution that standardises a modern cash payment alongside core ceremonial requirements. The church, instead of being an agent of disruption, became the co-governor of tradition, demonstrating collective agency in the face of modernity.

4.2.4 Child Naming and Symbolic Hybridity

Marriage comes with the blessing of childbearing, which also culminates in child naming. When a woman gives birth for her first time for her husband, the child is named by either the husband's father or mother, depending on the sex of the child. Subsequent children will be named by the parent. Child naming ceremony in the traditional Atswean-Asi community and the entire Kuteb ethnic group does not involve a pronounced celebration where there are guests. It is a low-key event that only involves the immediate family members and sometimes very close friends of the child's parent or grandparent. As soon as a child is born, the father of the child immediately notifies his own father (grandfather of the child) that his wife has given birth and when the naming of child. A close date is set and, on that day, a cock or hen is slaughtered for the child's mother to celebrate her fruitfulness.

At this point, it becomes necessary to say that the naming of the child is based on wishes and events. Some name their grandchildren or children in advance, that is, even before the child is born. For instance, when you hear names like *ikitaka*, which is translated to mean 'where is the masquerade?' signifies that a child was born when a masquerade was being dressed for a traditional event. It is believed that masquerade dressing is an invisible process for women. Names like *Andeze* (humans are jealous and full of hate) are given to a child whose father or grandfather faces jealousy and hatred. *Kweka* (King of war) is named for a child whose father or grandfather is a war lord or skilled in the art of war (Yabkwa, 2022).

On the day of the naming ceremony, a symbolic moment unfolds as the grandfather of the newborn takes the child in his arms and begins a series of eulogies, invoking blessings that reflect the community's aspirations for the child's well-being. He utters words of protection and hope, such as: "You shall not see evil. You will not cry. The only cry you will cry is the cry for breast milk", signifying a life free from pain, sickness, or misfortune. The grandfather continues by declaring protective metaphors against adversity: "If trouble comes from the east, you will be at the west; if from the west, you will be at the south; if from the south, you will be at the north; if from behind, you will be in front; if from the front, you will be behind; if from the left, you will be at the right" (Andeshara, 2021). These pronouncements are understood as spiritual safeguards, seeking to position the child perpetually away from danger. Following the blessings, the father assumes the ceremonial role of naming the child. This is accompanied by the symbolic act of tying a palm leaf to the child's hand, a gesture that may denote protection, spiritual identification, or a cultural bond with the ancestors and the land.

The naming ceremony presents a powerful instance of Symbolic Synthesis (or Hybrid Semiotics). The grandfather's traditional eulogy, with its pre-Christian, spiritual metaphors of protection ('If trouble comes from the east, you will be at the west...'), is deliberately retained and articulated alongside the formal Christian naming convention. This ritual ensures the child's identity is anchored in both the lineage (traditional universe) and the new faith. Furthermore, the tying of the palm leaf functions as a physical signifier of indigenous protection, a tangible cultural object existing in the Third



Space alongside the invisible, abstract promises of Christian faith, a synthesis that is actively maintained by the community.

4.2.5 Menstrual Segregation

One other cultural practice in Atswean-Asi is that of segregating women who are under their menstrual cycle. Once a woman or lady starts to menstruate, she is segregated from members of the community to an enclosed hut outside the community for her to reside there until her menstrual cycle is completed. One of the reasons for this segregation is hinged on the fact that the lady on her menstrual cycle wouldn't cook for anyone within her household. A woman during menstruation is considered to be dirty, and she is expected never to cook for anyone, not even her husband. The women segregated because of their menstrual cycle are usually given cooked food in the morning and evening. The person who brings the food, once close to the segregated hut, will call on the lady to come pick her food from outside the hut; he or she is not permitted to come too close to the lady (Joshua, 2022). Joshua (2022) described the gravity of this segregation, noting that it was a protective measure for men's spiritual power: "A woman in that state carries a heat that can melt a hunter's charms or make a warrior's medicine turn to water. We did not keep them in huts to punish them, but to protect the strength of the household". It should be noted that the segregated hut is central for all within the Atswean-Asi community; put differently, the hut is for all ladies on their menstrual cycle in the community. It is unusual to have only one lady at a time in the hut; there are usually two or more ladies in the segregated hut who are on their menstrual cycle. In this case, the ladies would have companies because they will get to gist to themselves. But in the eventuality where there is only one lady who is on her menstrual cycle, she will definitely stay there alone and perhaps be bored because she has no company.

In the 2000s, in Atswean-Asi society, the practice of menstrual segregation had mostly faded away. The use of sanitary pads helped women manage menstruation privately, so many people mostly do not know when a woman is on her period. Additionally, the growth of the settlement and the rising population changed social structures, making it impractical to keep a communal isolation hut. However, some men who still feel strong ties to older traditions limit their interactions with menstruating women if they suspect or hear that a woman is on her cycle. These men avoid eating food prepared by these women because they believe that doing so weakens their charms. This lingering attitude reflects earlier beliefs, even though the broader society has moved away from organised menstrual segregation.

The decline of the physical segregation hut is not simply a rejection of cultural logic. It represents a transformation that can be understood through spatial and moral hybridity. In this context, the moral logic of ritual impurity remains intact but is internalised by female Christian converts. They adopt it as a way of self-imposed, private ethical discipline. The external community boundary of the hut is replaced by an internal moral boundary. This change maintains the cultural value of female sanctity while

reinterpreting the traditional taboo in a way that fits with Christian ethics. Recent research supports this view. Marimbe (2024) and Strhan (2012) explain how Christian converts in Africa blend traditional values into mixed moral systems. They move from rituals enforced by outsiders to personal ethical choices. Peel (2016) shows that people rarely give up customary practices during conversion. Instead, they often take on new meanings within different religious or social settings. Studies on purity and social boundaries, including the Oxford Handbook of Purity (2020s), along with research on syncretism and hybridisation, further illustrate that moral authority and cultural values can remain, even when the visible signs of tradition fade away.

However, there is still a gap in the literature about the specific shift from a physical, communal structure like the menstrual hut to an internal moral boundary. This gap allows for the introduction of spatial and moral hybridity as a new way to understand the topic. It shows how cultural institutions can keep their ethical functions while moving from public enforcement to private moral awareness. In the case of Atswean-Asi, this change highlights the flexibility and resilience of cultural practices in response to religious change, technology, and population growth.

4.2.6 Male Circumcision and Taboos

Another cultural practice in Atswean-Asi is that of male circumcision. why it is distinct from other climes in Nigeria or other ethnic groups is that male circumcision in Atswean-Asi is only done during the harmattan season. Culturally, the harmattan season is regarded as a time of transition and endurance, embodying the resilience and fortitude expected of boys as they undergo this rite of passage into manhood (Yashe 2021). The timing reinforces important community values such as strength, patience, and unity, which are traits that are held in high esteem within the Atswean-Asi society. Furthermore, from a practical perspective, circumcision during the dry season presents more favourable healing conditions. The lack of moisture and reduced risk of infection during harmattan greatly improve post-operative care. In contrast, the rainy season, with its high humidity and prevalence of bacteria, poses greater health risks and is therefore avoided for such procedures. In addition, circumcision is conducted in groups, with several boys undergoing the procedure together. This collective experience adds a communal and symbolic dimension to the rite. Those circumcised at the same time often form lasting bonds, creating a sense of solidarity and mutual support that fosters social cohesion.

In recent decades, the practice has changed significantly. Circumcision is no longer limited to the harmattan period. The procedure now usually happens within seven days after a male child's birth, regardless of the season. This change shows shifting family preferences and the rising impact of modern medical advice, which encourages early infant circumcision. Some families still depend on traditional practitioners and methods, while others prefer hospital-based procedures carried out under clinical supervision. Regarding the shift from the traditional Harmattan season to medicalised infant circumcision, one community elder remarked:



"In the old days, the cold wind taught the boy to be a man. Now, the hospital does it before the child can even speak. The skin is gone, but the spirit of the rite has moved to the church" (Yashe, 2021).

This combination of traditional and biomedical approaches reveals how the community is slowly reshaping an old rite while keeping parts of its cultural heritage.

There are certain cultural taboos in Atswean-Asi which include;

On no account should anyone whistle at night because it is believed that you are calling on evil spirits.

The traditional Atswean community does not allow children to eat egg because it is a belief that when children are allowed to eat egg they will learn to steal.

It is taboo for anyone to steal and in the eventuality, one is caught stealing, the person will be stripped naked and youths in the village or community will sing mockery songs to march the thief round the community.

Women are not allowed to sit in the council of men and talk except they are mandated to do so.

Adultery is a grievous offence and it is punishable in Atswean.

The evolution of these taboos highlights a shift in "Moral Authority." Historically, taboos against stealing or whistling were enforced by the fear of ancestral spirits (Iki-fen). Today, these same prohibitions are upheld through Christian moral teaching. The "Brokerage" here is subtle: the community retained the rules (don't steal, don't commit adultery) but swapped the enforcer (from Ancestors to Jesus). This allows the Atswean-Asi to be "good Christians" without ceasing to be "good Kutebs," effectively stabilising the moral order within the Third Space.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the Atswean-Asi experience not as a story of cultural loss, but as a sophisticated project of Historical Reconstitution. The movement beyond the binary of "tradition versus modernity," avails us the prism to see that the Atswean-Asi have utilised Selective Cultural Brokerage to navigate the pressures of religious and social change. This process does not result in a diluted identity; rather, it produces a "Third Space" that is rationally furnished and institutionally governed. The theoretical contribution of this research extends beyond the borders of Taraba State, Nigeria, offering three germane insights for the broader study of anthropology and religion: first, the shift from Individual to Corporate Brokerage. While previous scholarship focused on individual "gatekeepers", this study demonstrates that in many post-colonial contexts, brokerage is an institutional act. The alliance between the *Be Kwe* (traditional council) and the RCCN (church leadership) shows that cultural survival often depends on "Co-governance." This model can be applied globally to study how indigenous structures in South America, Asia, or other parts of Africa form strategic partnerships with global institutions to manage their own modernisation.

Second, the mechanism of Functional Substitution. The data reveals that when a traditional practice such as the menstrual hut or the worship of *Iki-fen*, appears to vanish, it is often actually "relocated". Through Selective Cultural Brokerage, the community transfers the underlying social or spiritual function to a new, Christianised form. This suggests that "conversion" is less about the erasure of indigenous needs and more about the strategic selection of new providers to meet those same ancient needs. Third, Indigenous Agency as Authorial Power. This study challenges the idea that globalisation is a force that simply happens "to" passive local communities. Instead, the Atswean-Asi case proves that indigenous groups are the active architects of their own hybridity. The changes that were brought by legislation; such as the standardisation of marriage costs, made the community leaders exert "Sovereign Selection". They decide what is kept, what is modified, and what is discarded.

Selective Cultural Brokerage provides a foundational framework for understanding how societies in the Global South maintain their distinctiveness. It reveals that the "Third Space" is not a place of confusion or accidental mixing, but a site of deliberate cultural policymaking. For scholars of anthropology, this model offers a way to analyse how traditional identities are not merely surviving the modern world but are being systematically rebuilt to thrive within it.

In light of these findings, the following recommendations are re-contextualised to support the continued management and evolution of this resilient hybrid culture:

- Cultural documentation should be systematically undertaken to preserve oral histories, rituals, and customs in various formats for future generations.
- Traditional knowledge should be incorporated into local educational curricula to promote cultural pride and awareness among the youth.
- Dialogue between traditional leaders, religious figures, and community members should be encouraged to promote an understanding of how both cultural and religious values can coexist.
- Cultural festivals should be revived where some of these practices are demonstrated and showcased.

Abbreviations

RCCN: Reformed Church of Christ for Nations

Declarations

Consent for publication

All participants whose oral interviews are cited (e.g., Anderi Andeshara, Dauda A., etc.) provided informed consent for their contributions and names to be published.



Availability of data and materials

The data supporting this study consists of oral interviews and ethnographic field notes. Due to the nature of oral history and to protect the privacy of the participants, the raw interview transcripts are not publicly available. Relevant data is contained within the article.

Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no financial or personal relationships that could have inappropriately influenced the writing or findings of this article.

Author's Note: The author is a member of the Kuteb ethnic group and has family relationship with Atswean-Asi (Kwambai). This relationship provided unique access to the oral traditions and community leaders essential for this study. This affiliation is declared to ensure full transparency.

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Authors' contributions

I am the sole author and also responsible for all aspects of the research, including conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, analysis, and the writing of the manuscript.

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A Male Domain? Gender Bias and Scholarly Production on the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in Nigeria¹

Samuel Edet²

Abstract:

Scholarship on the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has expanded considerably following the group's proscription in 2017, yet the developing body of literature risks reproducing the masculinised epistemologies that have traditionally marginalised gender from conflict studies. This article examines how gender has been treated across three temporal waves of peer-reviewed literature on IPOB (2017–2026) using a five-theme analytical framework derived from feminist conflict studies. Drawing on 20 studies sourced from Google Scholar and ProQuest, the paper finds that gender remains overwhelmingly peripheral owing to early scholarship's fixation on securitisation narratives and state responses. However, there has also been a tentative acknowledgement of women's presence, not as analytical or theoretical sites, but as incidental ones. A gendered turn has, however, emerged since 2023 from engagements with the socio-economic consequences of the sit-at-home order and women's roles in mobilisation. The budding gender turn entails that several gaps persist, particularly around sexual and gender-based violence, hypermasculinity, and the transnational dimensions of IPOB's operations. Filling these gaps, the article argues, is not merely corrective but a necessity for effective conflict prevention and de-escalation.

Keywords:

IPOB; Gender; Political Violence; Nigeria; Conflict Studies.

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1. *Introduction*

Africa's heritage of poorly constructed borders and ill-developed postcolonial states that inherited them is a key driver of violence. Between 1960 and the present, secessionist movements and insurgencies have continued to occur, creating a violent context. In 1967, Nigeria waged war with its breakaway territory, Biafra, a three-year war that even in its passing evokes significance through the activities of IPOB. Since 2017, the group's activities have posed a challenge to the Nigerian state, which has securitised them as such through proscription. Along with this current, there has developed a body of literature that runs the risk of perpetuating the gender bias underpinning scholarship on armed conflict and political violence. In the words of Moser and Clark (2001), it must recognise the universality of gender across all facets of life and abstain from the tendency to masculinise discussions of conflict, that is, to treat conflict as a 'male domain'. Several works across various streams of political violence and conflict studies increasingly produce gender-sensitive scholarship, including studies within Nigeria that have discussed women's active role in resisting Boko Haram (e.g., Agbiboa, 2022) and the importance of foregrounding gender to attain inclusive and just policies in conflict situations (Shepherd, 2010). Foregrounding gender is important not just to highlight the experiences of women who bear the significant impact of political violence, but also to understand several issues that necessarily affect the activities and outcomes of development interventions (Ekpo & Olawale, 2025). Such questions are of particular importance to the context of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its activities, given their escalating significance as a security issue in Nigeria. The activities of IPOB increasingly connect with other regional conflicts in Africa, including in Cameroon, where the group has been identified as cooperating with Ambazonian separatists (Boudombo, 2021; John, 2025). This paper asks how the literature on IPOB has treated the issue of gender, and what is foregrounded.

Gender, as used in this study, is operationalised as primarily centred on women. This definition is necessitated by the broadness of the concept. Existing conceptions emphasise that gender is characterised by multidimensionality, which extends its limits beyond women-centric concerns (Assumpção et al., 2026) and even aggregates associations with identity and devices of social behaviour regulation (Barnes, 2020; Neji, 2017). This sets gender analysis as a kaleidoscope that, as intersectional gender-facing studies indicate (see Conroy et al., 2020), necessarily factors in intersections between concepts and issues such as gender norms, masculinities and power relations structuring roles assumed of and performed by women and men, serving up a broad register which this paper's analysis recognises but does not foreground in favour of a narrower focus.

Maintaining this evidently narrow focus on women is thus done in keeping with this study's preliminary assumption that IPOB scholarship displays a conservatism that screens out issues of women.

After this introductory section, the article briefly discusses established critiques of masculinised scholarship to set the stage for its exploration and analytical framework. The methodology section outlines the data collection method. Findings are then

presented, followed by discussion and conclusion sections. The article's contribution maps into existing literature on gendered studies of conflict and political violence in Africa, identifying potential future research directions for specialised and generalist studies within these fields.

2. Masculinities of Scholarship and Analytical Framework

De-masculinising or gendering conflict studies is the zeitgeist of contemporary conflict studies, particularly beginning in the late 20th century. This has been to correct the negative consequences of the persistence of the reverse dynamic in scholarship. Zeeshan and Aliefendioğlu (2024) declare that gender is a contested topic in conflict studies. Yet, the process by which this declaration emerges can be traced to decades of scholarship that has constructed an epistemological basis for the imperative of gender scholarship. Tickner (1992) begins this movement in her study as an ambition to mainstream women's experiences to overcome gender hierarchies that perpetuate insecurity as well as the attendant consequences. It is also fundamental for building a comprehensive picture of security, to correct what has often materialised in a male-dominated world as 'security built on the insecurity of others', or more explicitly women (Tickner, 1992, p. 55).

However, engendering women's issues is often important to move beyond stereotyped imaginaries of women as occupying 'victimhood'. Gendered studies foreground various issues. Prominently highlighted is the issue of sexual violence, often for its social and political significance. Cockburn (2013, p. 433) explains this: 'A woman who is raped in war is raped as a woman, a despised category. A man who is raped is assaulted as a man to reduce him to the status of a mere woman, and thus destroy his masculine self-respect'. Questions in this respect amount to what has been described as within the scope of a gendered political economy. Leatherman (2011, p. 116) theorises this approach as interrogating the '...power of hegemonic and allied masculinities and the ways they subject others for plunder and profit', which is interpreted as the import of gender for identities and functions of actors across individual, cultural and structural levels (Meger, 2015).

Wibben and Donahoe (2022, p. 397) have levelled the criticism of what they call 'the ill-informed and long-standing conflation of women with peace and peacefulness within mainstream narratives', signposting the fact that a sizeable amount of work exists documenting women's status as active conflict agents. Such critiques reference an already existent point posited since the turn of the 21st century. There has been growing acceptance within the scholarship that there is a need to appreciate the role some women may play in sustaining conflict moral economies and goading combatants to the frontline, as was the case in England during the First World War and in Sudan, evidence of which is contained in Cockburn (2013), and even as combatants implicated in massacres committed by the Basque separatist group ETA in Spain in the 20th century (Hamilton, 2007). Studies also show that women occupy leadership positions of non-state armed groups, embodying authority within such settings (Henshaw et al., 2019)

and actively exercising agency in these contexts (Loken & Matfess, 2022, 2024). There is therefore justification for discussing gender within the context of agency and victimhood, as is visible above.

Studies of separatism show that the possibilities of analysis can also incorporate other issues, especially the role of social institutions existing in the wider context of political violence. For instance, Echeverria (2003), while analysing the context around Basque separatism, highlighted that even what is taught within schools can sometimes centre as an important issue, given that such systems contribute to the construction of simultaneously pro-masculine and women-suppressing stereotypes.

Summarised collectively, as relevant to this study, the possible directions suggested by the configurative literature can be thought of in terms of the following five research directions:

Theme 1: Foregrounding women's agency rather than victimhood

Theme 2: Studying women's leadership and organisational roles

Theme 3: Analysing the gendered political economy of separatist conflict

Theme 4: Investigating how masculine identities shape mobilisation narratives

Theme 5: The role of gender norm-(re)producing institutions

Scholarship on political violence in Nigeria maps some of these themes already in detail. Oriola (2017) applies the gendered political economy approach to document the systematic strategic use of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), including forced marriages, against women in the Boko Haram insurgency. The study also discusses the participation of women as conveyor belts of violence through various violent actions such as suicide bombings (Oriola, 2017). Yet women's participation extends beyond compliant reasons and embodies resistance action, where women have organised into community defence groups to counter Boko Haram (Agbiboa, 2022). It remains unclear whether these nuances have been applied to or examined within the literature on IPOB.

3. Method

This study draws on two databases: Google Scholar and ProQuest. A systematic search was conducted in these databases to collect research articles. The search strategy used a set of search terms combining 'IPOB' (the frequently used shortened version of the Indigenous People of Biafra), gender, women, and south-east Nigeria, to reflect the geographical context of IPOB. These terms were combined using Boolean operators.

For each database, results were filtered to reflect studies undertaken between 2017 and 2026, to coincide with the years within which the activities of IPOB have been a significant issue. The literature review took place in March 2026. On Google Scholar, where there were no systematic filter options, articles were selected through manual skimming of the search results. The criterion for selecting a study was that it must be a full research article that specifically addresses IPOB. Papers that mentioned IPOB without explicitly addressing a particular aspect of its activities or significance were excluded.

Titles and abstracts were screened prior to full-text evaluation. Only English-language articles were selected.

Explicitly gender-relevant or gender-specific studies identified through this process were few ($n = 4$), signposting a paucity of gendered scholarship on IPOB. Owing to the limited representative capacity of four articles as to the state of broader scholarship on IPOB, 16 peer-reviewed studies were additionally selected to represent the wider literature, based on thematic concerns and analytical orientations characteristic of scholarship across the review period.

These studies were recruited as signposts for three temporal waves of literature: 2017–2019, 2020–2022, and 2023 to date. Coding drew from the five-theme analytical framework identified at the end of the literature review. The following categories were used: women’s agency, victimhood, political leadership, gendered socio-economic impacts, and gender and recruitment. These themes guided the analysis of the documents. In classifying the studies, the extent of gender engagement also materialised as useful (see Table 1). Active engagement (denoted as ‘+’) was recorded where studies specifically focused on gender or women as a research question, analytical category or as a substantive component of arguments made within the compass of such articles. Where references to *gender* or *women* were included as an empirical detail or illustrative detail without deep engagement, incidental engagement (denoted as ‘*’) was recorded. Studies with total absence of reference to gender or to women as a distinctive group were recorded as ‘absent’ (denoted as ‘–’).

S/N	Author (Year)	Theme	Gender Focus	Nature of Gender Engagement
1.	Adangor (2018)	Examines the political work performed by the 2017 proscription of IPOB as a terrorist organisation.	–	Gender not employed as analytical category; no acknowledgement of its absence.
2.	Abada, Omeh & Okoye (2020)	Analyses IPOB’s counter-securitisation strategies and situates the separatist agitation within Nigeria’s national question.	–	Gender neither employed as analytical category nor its absence noted.
3.	Ekpo (2019)	Examines IPOB’s failed counter-securitisation strategy centred on the ‘Jubril Al-Sudani’ conspiracy.	–	Gender not used as analytical lens.



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|-----|-------------------------------------|---|----------|---|
| 4. | Henry, Obiora David (2020) | Foregrounds & emergence as symptomatic of structural flaws and a crack in Nigeria's national unity. | IPOB's – | Gender absent. |
| 5. | Oyewole (2019) | Documents internal power contests and fracturing dynamics within pro-Biafra movements. | * | Female participation noted incidentally but scaffolded into power contest discourse. |
| 6. | Chukwudi et al. (2019) | Examines agitations and the Federal Government's response. | IPOB * | Reference to arrest of female IPOB members included as a detail, not analytically meaningful. |
| 7. | Okoli (2017) | Comparative critique of insurgent strategies of Boko Haram and IPOB. | * | Explicitly references three major pro-IPOB protests, identifying women as leading some. |
| 8. | Obagbinoko (2018) | Assesses the Nigerian state's response to IPOB as a violent conflict actor. | – | Protesters/activists named broadly with no reference to gender as a category. |
| 9. | Nwofe (2019) | Examines digital media practices and internet activism among IPOB members. | – | Field interviews conducted without identification of respondents' gender identities. |
| 10. | Idachaba & Nneli (2018) | Discusses IPOB's self-determination agitation and its re-invention through diaspora dynamics. | * | Applies feminist language metaphorically while discussing membership in broad terms. |
| 11. | Omilusi, Isaac & Ade-Johnson (2020) | Examines Biafra's role in mobilising IPOB. | Radio + | Documents women's active participation in sustaining IPOB's communication channels. |
| 12. | Kevin (2020) | Consolidates various human rights violations to construct | – | Aggregative approach foregrounds no gender-specific analysis. |

- a theoretical case against Nigeria's political stability.
13. Peter Fabian (2021) & Evaluates Biafra's rhetorical influence on rural audiences in south-eastern Nigeria. * Female voice enters as illustrative data, not as subject of gendered inquiry.
 14. Ayomola Oketokun (2021) & Examines the relationship between ethnicity, separatist agitations, and national stability. * Acknowledges women's agency without theorisation.
 15. Owoeye, Ezeanya & Obiegbunam (2022) Appraises the socio-political and economic impacts of IPOB's sit-at-home tactic. * Highlights women's perspectives on the lockdown's impact but scaffolded within broader community discourse.
 16. Nnam et al. (2022) Examines state repression and its relationship to escalation in Biafra-linked social movements. * Declares female interviewees were included yet privileges male testimonies; female data analytically subordinated.
 17. Alagh et al. (2024) Examines the disproportionate socio-economic costs borne by women as a result of IPOB's sit-at-home order. + First gender-sensitive study of IPOB; foregrounds women's vulnerability and signals exposure to SGBV.
 18. Obi-Ani (2024) Explores the broad dynamics of Biafra separatism in south-east Nigeria. + Visualises the broad impact on women's businesses; narrates destruction of female livelihoods.
 19. Onyishi (2025) Interrogates the implicit motivations driving armed struggle in south-eastern Nigeria. + Introduces gender as an important variable rather than a merely descriptive one.

20. Akande (2026)	Critiques the historical erasure of women from IPOB leadership narratives.	+ Documents women as custodians of tradition and spirituality; challenges masculine-privileging epistemology.
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*Figure 1: Characteristics of studies included in the review. Note: + = Active gender engagement; – = Gender absent; * = Incidental gender reference.*

4. Findings

4.1 Gender as Peripheral within Securitisation Narratives (2017–2019)

The wave of scholarship on IPOB in this period engaged with the organisation's political significance and the Nigerian government's responses. Several studies foreground IPOB's emergence as symptomatic of structural flaws and a crack in Nigeria's national unity (Henry et al., 2020) and its attempts to influence political discourse through counter-securitisation strategies that delegitimise the Nigerian state (Abada et al., 2020; Ekpo, 2019). This securitisation framing is exemplified by Adangor (2018), who discussed the political work that IPOB's proscription in 2017 performed, arguing that labelling IPOB as a terrorist organisation demonstrated the arbitrariness of state exercise of power rather than the objective application of security law. Such framings neither employed gender as an analytical category nor recognised the absence of gender.

Rather, women's agency was acknowledged incidentally, mainly within the discussion of dynamics of the Nigerian government's response to the group. Chukwudi et al. (2019, p. 634) reference the arrest of women members of IPOB as a detail rather than as an analytically meaningful observation. In Oyewole (2019), a more substantial yet incidental engagement with gender exists: the study documents female participation in the group's internal politics, signalling women's presence. A female member of IPOB announcing changes to the group's leadership and communication platform is how this engagement materialises in Oyewole's study. There are also references to external female participation in reconciliation attempts between breakaway factions. Yet these references, while analytically related to women's political agency, are scaffolded into broader discourse of power contest within the group. Such observations are not pursued as gendered findings, leaving gender analytically undeveloped.

This analytical silence is complicated by empirical evidence available even within this period. Okoli (2018) references three instances of major pro-IPOB protests, explicitly identifying women as leading two of the three (a figure amounting to 66% of examples cited), yet the study does not analytically pursue this observation. Correspondingly, certain studies tend towards broadly naming IPOB protesters or activists without reference to any analytical category (Obagbinoko, 2018; Nwofe, 2019). Even where field interviews were conducted with activists, results were reported without identification of respondents' gender identities. It is the analytical choices of researchers, rather than the absence of women from IPOB activities, that explains the peripherality of gender. In Idachaba and Nneli (2018), this dynamic is illustrated: their study discusses

IPOB's membership in broad terms yet applies feminist language to describe the group, referring to it as 'her' and constructing a motherhood picture of the organisation. Gender as such exists only in a metaphorical sense.

4.2 Expanding Narratives and Peripheral Inclusion (2020–2022)

By 2020, documentary evidence of further categories of young women participating in IPOB activities had emerged, with reports of an 18-year-old female IPOB member arrested for participating in arson attacks on public infrastructure (AllAfrica, 2020). The silent treatment of gender thus materialised not as an empirically rationalised approach but as a structural choice. In the second wave of scholarship, this orientation remains, with a modification: a tentative acknowledgement of the importance of women as 'central' to IPOB activities. Nonetheless, the question of women's agency receives the most visible development. Omilusi et al. (2020) document women's active participation in sustaining IPOB's communication channels and their involvement in mobilisation. Similarly, Peter and Fabian (2021) include within their qualitative study anecdotal evidence from a young female sympathiser to IPOB rhetoric communicated through Radio Biafra. Still, female voice enters as illustrative data rather than as a subject of gendered inquiry. This signals a performative presence of women as methodological supplements, a comparable tendency displayed by Ayomola and Oketokun (2021). The failure to pursue gender as an analytical issue amounts to mere acknowledgement of women's agency without the imperative of added theorisation.

Still, the angle of women in protests materialises as an afterthought, and discussions of violations of human rights, which dominate this epoch, continue to foreground an aggregative approach. Typical of such studies is Kevin (2020), which consolidates various rights violations to construct a theoretical case against the viability of Nigeria's political stability. Nevertheless, this period has the additional function of signposting an increasing gaze on the security consequences of the actions of IPOB. Beginning in 2022, studies discuss the consequences of the group's 'sit-at-home tactic'. The crop of studies published, predominantly rooted in qualitative secondary data analysis, highlights perspectives of women on the impact of the lockdown, albeit scaffolded within broader discussions of the public (Owoeye et al., 2022). Emblematic of this dynamic, Nnam et al. (2022), while approaching discourse on the Biafra separatist political landscape of which IPOB is part, declare that they interviewed females yet privilege male testimonies in block texts as the evidentiary basis for their core arguments. As such, the analytical infrastructure for a gendered argument is present in the data; the field has simply not yet developed the conceptual vocabulary to deploy it.

4.3 A (Visible) Gendered Turn (2023 to Date)

It is within this period that the first gender-sensitive studies of IPOB emerge. Alagh et al. (2024), in one such effort, examine the impact of IPOB's sit-at-home order on women, arguing that women bear disproportionate socio-economic costs. This qualitative study, which applies a gendered political economy perspective, emphasises that women's

vulnerability has increased, a condition the authors argue is under-theorised, arising from the securitised and politicised gaze of scholarship on IPOB. There are also indications that this context increases women's vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence. As must be said, this article occupies the conceptual space as it draws primarily on secondary data and lacks direct engagement with women, making the paper susceptible to claims that it speaks for women without directly studying them.

Akande's (2026) qualitative work on the leadership structure of IPOB moves into this methodological space. Akande critiques these narratives as perpetuating a historical erasure of women (an extension of dynamics that stretch as far back as the civil war), drawing on interviews with female IPOB sympathisers to explore women as active project builders in Biafran nationalism. According to Akande (2026, p. 70):

“In Aba’s bustling markets and Onitsha’s vibrant streets, some women serve as custodians of tradition and spirituality, imparting cultural values and narratives that fuel the spirit of Biafran nationalism. Through street protests where they have used their bodies as an instrument of resistance against military harassments, they demand recognition of Biafra as an independent state.”

This observation challenges the masculine-privileging epistemology that, as mapped in the previous sections, dominates the literature. Analytically, it positions women as central to IPOB's nationalism, their existence simultaneously drawing on and reproducing tradition. Apart from the foregrounding of women within cultural and institutional spaces, there is a tacit gesturing towards the question of gender-reproducing institutions and their relationship to separatist mobilisation, thereby platforming both women's agency and their leadership roles.

This contribution manifests as a continuation of a gendered turn that Onyishi (2025) foregrounded. That qualitative study, which included at least 150 participants, arrives at the conclusion that ‘...the influence of implicit motivations on the facilitation or inhibition of armed struggle in south-eastern Nigeria was influenced by an individual's gender, whether male or female’ (Onyishi, 2025, p. 8). The significance of this conclusion is that it introduces gender as an important analytical variable rather than merely a descriptive one. In the broader literature of this period, this insight is applied to discuss the socio-economic impacts of the group's activities. Obi-Ani (2024), in a qualitative study on the dynamics of Biafran separatism, visualises the broad impact on women's businesses, narrating how IPOB's sit-at-home order has destroyed female livelihoods and disrupted their everyday lives, questioning who benefits from the chaos the order imposes. The increase in studies mirrors a corresponding rise in the frequency of arrests of female suspects linked to IPOB, with at least five female suspects arrested in 2024 (The Sun, 2024a, 2024b).

5. Discussion

Findings show that gender is a peripheral concern within the literature on the Indigenous People of Biafra. Across three waves of scholarship, it appears as an incidental rather than a substantive analytical concern. Alongside this, there is limited theorisation or systematic analysis, which maps into a broader tendency within conflict studies to reproduce masculinised or non-gender-differentiated understandings of political violence. Oha (1998) shows that females have often been constructed as less rational, foolish, weak, jealous, and evil, in comparison to men, resulting in the sexual objectification of women, though it is also argued that Igbo culture is genderless (Ezeifeke, 2017). All the same, the period beginning from 2022 marks a turn, connected perhaps to the intensification of the sit-at-home order announced by the group. The increase in knowledge production thus appears to shadow periods of intensified agitation. Such links between events and scholarship are not unprecedented but rather reproduce a trend matched in other domains of political violence scholarship. Ekpo and Olawale (2025), in discussing the place of gender in Boko Haram research, note that increasing production of knowledge on gender followed the heightened global attention generated by the #ChibokGirls kidnapping in 2014.

However, the literature on IPOB still needs to explore several issues to appropriately establish a bridge to broader studies of separatist politics and armed conflict. Across all three waves, there is little engagement with or attempt at gendering sexual violence. Issues of sexual violence, particularly rape, and gender-based violence matter as important lines of inquiry, which have only been mapped so far in grey literature; available data materialises through civil society reports (ActionAid, 2021) and journalistic accounts (AllAfrica, 2022) rather than peer-reviewed scholarship. This is one of the metanarratives subsumed under the grand narratives of ethnic nationalism. The blind spot of sexual violence is particularly difficult to address, because sexual violence operates in a dynamic that is peculiar and complex, as much as it is unique to each conflict and circumstance (Stachow, 2020; Nordas & Cohen, 2021). Scholarship on political violence in Nigeria already recognises, albeit within the context of the Boko Haram insurgency, that women are often victims of sexual violence in anomic contexts and are preyed upon by armed actors or, in some instances, ‘donated’ by sympathisers to armed groups (Oriola, 2017). Moreover, scholars argue that sexual violence is often pursued as a tactic by marginalised men who exfiltrate pride through the symbolic violation of feminine bodies (Oriola, 2017; Henry, 2016; Zurbriggen, 2010). Homing in on these questions also allows for consideration of differentiated impacts across gender categories, including the critical distinction between women who have consensual sex in anomic conditions and those whose sexual relations are coerced and weaponised (Henry, 2016). Equally pressing is how these dynamics intersect with hypermasculinity, defined as ‘behavioural dispositions justified by beliefs: entitlement to callous sex, violence as manly, and danger as exciting’ (Mosher & Tomkins, 1988, p. 61). The impact of masculine norm-producing systems and structures also merits analytical attention as a standalone issue. Materially, such systems, including those embedded within the family

structure, produce tensions that suppress gender participation in comparable contexts such as Pakistan's Balochistan Province (Eggert et al., 2025). Nonetheless, while IPOB's scholarship discusses the group as a Nigeria-limited operation, its purported relationship with Ambazonian separatists in Cameroon mandates an examination of its transnational operations. The Anglophone Crisis has already been documented with qualitatively evidenced SGBV cases alongside disproportionate impacts on women across economic and educational domains (Cyril et al., 2023; Folefac & Ani, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2022).

6. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the state of gender in research on IPOB. Following the analysis of 20 journal articles, several conclusions are evident. The question of gender is underrepresented and remains an emerging theme in IPOB scholarship. Early scholarship foregrounded securitisation narratives, state responses, and questions of national unity, giving rise to a corpus that did not consider disaggregating genders. Empirical references to women appeared incidentally and not in a manner likely to prompt sustained engagement. Minimal improvements manifested in the second wave of scholarship. Women increasingly appeared within accounts of mobilisation and protest activity; yet, appearance did not translate to analytical visibility, given that these appearances were more descriptive than analytical, with female voices entering as illustrative evidence within broader arguments. It is only since 2023 that a visible gender turn has begun to emerge, with dedicated studies examining the socio-economic consequences of the sit-at-home order on women's livelihoods and the participation of women within the cultural and political structures associated with the movement. Gender is thus entering the analytical register of scholarship on IPOB, yet the established marginalisation implies significant gaps that studies must cover, particularly in terms of SGBV and the structural bases of masculinised hierarchies of power that define the group's mobilisation and operational tactics. Interventions on these gaps would bring the scholarship into alignment with the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda established by UNSCR 1325, whose participation, protection and prevention dimensions respectively require evidence on women's political agency, exposure to violence and the constraining barriers to the full range of their socio-political rights (George & Shepherd, 2016). Incorporating such a perspective is important for producing a more complete understanding of the social dynamics that underpin separatist movements and political violence in Nigeria and beyond. This is also useful for constructing well-informed strategies that enhance peace and stability. It is an accepted position that mainstreaming gender breaks the cycle of violence and contributes to achieving more lasting peace (Tripp, 2020) and ensures that targeted development interventions to prevent further marginalisation are put in place (Mazurana et al., 2002).

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The Politicization of Intelligence in Nigeria: Implications for National Security¹

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Abstract:

Intelligence is one of the foundations of national security. It provides decision-makers with the ability to anticipate threats, identify targets, and allocate resources effectively to address such threats. However, intelligence in contemporary Nigeria has been politicized by the ruling, undermining professional efficacy of key intelligence agencies, including the Department of State Services (DSS), the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), and other intelligence establishments under the Nigerian Police Force and resulting in the securitization of political oppositions, dissent opinions, and social protests as existential threats to justify heavy-handed responses and arbitrary surveillance. Drawing on qualitative method of data collection and analysis, the study examines the pervasive phenomenon of intelligence politicization and its impact on Nigeria's national security architecture. The study argues that political interference on the operations of intelligence agencies in Nigeria has significantly altered the professionalism of the Nigerian intelligence community, converting them as "attack-dogs" of the ruling elites for regime protection. It further argues that the continuous focus on regime protection with little attention on national security has led to chronic intelligence failures with severe implications on the country's national security. Ultimately, the study argues that depoliticizing intelligence is a critical prerequisite for building a resilient national security strategy capable of addressing Nigeria's complex and evolving security landscape. The study recommends a radical restructuring of the intelligence framework, merit-based recruitment, robust legislative oversight, among others to ensure institutional autonomy and strengthen the intelligence community for enhance national security.

Keywords:

Intelligence;
Politicization; National
Security; Democratic
Governance; Legislative
Oversight; Nigeria.

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Introduction

Globally, the conduct of intelligence is recognised as a paramount national security priority, undertaken clandestinely and with strict professional discipline, insulated from politicking and partisan interests because of its critical role in national survival and long-term sustainability. It involves the collection, analysis, and dissemination of intelligence to protect a state, organizations, or individuals from threats, including the use of advanced methodologies and software tools for risk management and threat prevention (Ransom & Pringle, 2025). Intelligence requires skilled analysis, effective agency coordination, and clear directives to ensure timely and accurate responses to threats, usually handled by professionals deployed in various sectors, such as government, military, law enforcement, and private national security firms, whose mandate is to analyse and respond accurately and timely to multifaceted threats in both physical and cyber environments, such as terrorism, insurrections, espionage, and cyberattacks (Wahab, 2024). Second primary role of intelligence is to discover opportunity that will either result in national strategic advantage or maintain such advantage (Putter, 2026). When intelligence as an organization and/or a process are interfered with by politics and partisanship, its objectivity is destroyed, its effectiveness undermined, and the integrity of the national security system is eroded and fundamentally compromised.

The politicization of intelligence refers to the manipulation of intelligence analysis to fit prevailing political agendas, support specific policy preferences, or please political decision-makers. It involves a shift away from the core intelligence mission of objective analysis and truth-telling towards advocacy or “salesmanship” of a desired outcome (Treverton, 2008: 53). Politicizing the state intelligence function have become a common phenomenon in Africa, where ruling regimes use state security services, surveillance, and information control to target political opponents, suppress civic dissent, and protect partisan interests rather than national security. Recent studies published by Democracy In Africa (DIA) published in February 2026 revealed that intelligence has been personalized and politicized by ruling regimes in Africa’s longest-standing democracy countries like Botswana, South Africa, Uganda, and Algeria, noting that the structural pathologies in these countries have render State security services instruments of elite power rather than national security (DIA, 2026). This does not mean that such dangerous phenomenon is limited to these countries alone, it has been observed in several young democracies and authoritarian regimes, but more entrenched in those aforementioned countries and carried out so much impunity without consideration to the damages on national security.

Nigeria is not left behind in this dangerous phenomenon of intelligence politicization. It has emerged as a critical national concern, threatening the country’s national security and stability. The various strata of security governance have been pervaded, from the institutions of governance to the intelligence managers down to the civil populace. Intelligence agencies established to provide objective and timely intelligence for decision-making have increasingly become susceptible to political manipulation,

undermining the integrity of intelligence, compromising the effectiveness of security operations, and eroding public trust in institutions. Sadly, the consequences are obvious due to the complex security landscape where threats such as Boko Haram terrorism, armed banditry and kidnapping for ransom, militancy and oil theft, and separatist movements have continued unabated for more than two decades (Irregular Warfare Centre-IWC, 2025).

This paper explores the dynamics of intelligence politicisation in Nigeria, its implications for national security, and potential pathways for reform. It adopts a qualitative and non-empirical approach rooted in interpretive analysis. Data sources include scholarly publications on intelligence management in Nigeria and reports stemming from media coverage. Primary data sources include policy documents on Nigerian intelligence and national security to identify patterns and trends in intelligence politicization from 2015 to 2026. Thematic analysis was used to identify and analyse key themes, such as manipulation of intelligence for political gain, impact on security operations, and institutional responses. This approach provided a nuanced insight into complex political and security dynamics in Nigeria.

Exploring the Concepts of Intelligence, Politicization of Intelligence, and National Security

Politicization of intelligence cannot be sufficiently explained without first and foremost understanding what intelligence constitute. Intelligence, in this context is security intelligence, which is a life cycle of collecting and analysing information to support national security, including counterintelligence activities (Lowenthal, 2002). The United States Joint Publication 2-01 (2004:2) defines intelligence as the product resulting from the collection, processing, integration, evaluation, analysis, and interpretation of available information concerning foreign nations, hostile or potentially hostile forces, or areas of actual or potential operations. The whole essence of the process is to change raw data into actionable intelligence for the purpose of maintaining national security. This understanding of intelligence by the United States Joint Publication aligns with the definition enshrined in Nigeria's National Security Act (NSA Cap 278, 1993), which states that intelligence is evaluated information relevant to a government's formulation and implementation of policy to further its national security and to deal with threats from actual and potential adversaries.

The Objective of intelligence as provided by these two definitions aligns with Lowenthal (2022) position, which is to enable governments to identify threats, anticipate terrorist activities, and support evidence-based operational decisions, policies, plans and decisions. By this understanding, intelligence plays key roles in counterintelligence and counterterrorism operations, including understanding the threat, giving warning of adversary's intentions and capabilities, and finding and disrupting the adversary. It also provides counterterrorism forces with targets and opportunities to attack terrorist capabilities and processes, thereby achieving strategic objectives (Pollard, 2009). Emphatically, Ratcliff (2016) insists that integrating

intelligence into strategic and operational planning enhances the prevention and disruption of terrorist activities. This view is upheld by Gill and Phythian (2021), who posit that intelligence-led operation improves proactive decision-making, noting that without credible and reliable intelligence security operations can hardly be successful. This means that intelligence is about the ways and means adopted to protect the vital secrets of the state and how such intelligence is protected from falling into the wrong hands therefore it should be objectively handled.

Betts (2003) argues that the sacred norm of objectivity is broken when political interests determine intelligence assessments, warning that high polarization and duelling charges of politicization destroy trust and undermine national security efforts. However, scholars such as Robert Jervis (2006); Joshua Rovner (2011); and Glen Hastedt (2014) argue that intelligence is created to inform policy therefore the line between providing relevant information and influencing policy is often blurred. Although this may sound fair so as not to blame the political elites for manipulating intelligence for political gains, it is also important to note that the elites influence the choices about what data to collect, how to frame results, and which problem matters most. These choices quietly push specific political goals and values as national security goals to suppress standard and objective analysis (Gentry, 2024).

The manipulation of analysis to fit prevailing policy or politics according to Hyden (2020) strikes beyond competence to the fundamental ethics of the intelligence enterprise, which is determining the facts. This has been the bane of intelligence management in Africa where ruling elites influence intelligence experts to manipulate intelligence outcomes for their own political and personal interests at the detriment of the country's national security. Gwatiwa (2026) identifies four major variables under which intelligence personalization and politicization primarily rest in Africa, which includes historical legacies, regime type, intelligence governance styles, and the nature of state institutions charged with accountability. Using four cases studies of two democracies (South Africa & Botswana) and two authoritarians (Uganda & Algeria), the researcher concludes that liberation of postcolonial politics in the intelligence architecture, function, and governance across the regime types played a major role in the politicization and personalization of intelligence in African countries. He further notes that it is worst in countries where the heads of state have actual or intelligence-adjacent backgrounds.

Drawing from the holistic appreciation of the understanding of intelligence and intelligence politicisation Nte and Eyororokumoh (2025) assert that the politicization of intelligence in Nigeria occurs when intelligence findings are altered or hidden to serve political interests, compromising national security by leading to incorrect threat assessments and misallocated resources. This has been the bane of Nigeria's national security challenges, and the resultant effects are the rising security challenges across the country's six geopolitical zones with threatening lethality and fatalities that have resulted in the deaths of thousands of persons and displacement of millions of persons. These challenges include terrorism/insurgency in the northeast, herders/farmers conflict, inter-

ethnic conflicts, and armed banditry in the northcentral, armed banditry and kidnapping for ransom in the northwest, separatist movement in the southeast, militancy and oil theft in the south-south, and oil bunkering and kidnapping for ransom in the southwest.

Reflecting on the concept of national security, Lippman (1943) insists that a nation is secure to the extent that it is not in danger of having to sacrifice core values if it wishes to avoid war and can, if challenged to, maintain them by victory in such a war. This view is echoed by Wolfers (1952), who asserts that national security is the absence of threats to acquired values and subjectively as the absence of fear that those values will be attacked. He, however, argues that national security is an ambiguous symbol that can be used by politicians to justify varied policies. It is in this light that Trager and Kronenberg (1973) describe it as that part of government policy with its objectives centred on the creation of relevant national and international political conditions favourable to the protection or extension of vital national values against existing and potential adversaries. These interpretations of national security focus on the protection of values with little or no consideration for human security.

However, new considerations of national security have emerged from the human security perspective that broadened and deepened the concept by including human well-being, economic stability, and environmental health led by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In its landmark Human Development Report in 1994, the UNDP defined national security fundamentally as safety from chronic threats like hunger, disease, and repression, and protection from sudden, harmful disruptions in daily life (UNDP, 1994). Its objective as captured by Alkire (2002) centres on safeguarding the vital core of all human lives from critical, pervasive threats in such a way that is consistent with long-term human fulfilment. However, when the safeguarding of the vital core of all human lives is compromised for political interests, national security is undermined. It is in this light that Nigeria's former Minister of Defence, Lieutenant General Theophilus Yakubu Danjuma (rtd) warns against the politicisation of intelligence in Nigeria and calls for transparency and accountability in security management to build public trust and enhance intelligence management in Nigeria (Punch, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on three theories which include Principal-Agent Theory, Elite Theory and Structural Functionalism Theory to enable us explain how politicization happens (Principal-Agent Theory), why politicisation happens (Elite Theory), and the impact of politicisation on national security (Structural Functionalism). The principal-agent theory developed by scholars of the new institutional economic and rational choice theory such as Michael C Jensen and William Meckling (1976), Stephen Ross (1973), John Huber and Charles Shipan (2000) tries explain the relationship between the political leaders (principal) and the intelligence community (agent) such as the DSS, NIA, DIA, and other security agencies like the Nigerian Police. Its primary logic lies in the contractual and information tension between the two parties. While the principal

delegates authority which may be in conflict with national security interest, the agent prioritizes such authority over objective national interest to please the principal, which might lead to abuse of intelligence and professionalism (Nte, 2011). This is common in Nigeria where appointments of the leadership of security institutions such as the DSS, NIA and Police are exclusively rest with the President, by implication the president influences the objectivity of intelligence they produce. In most cases, the president might not even say a word, but they follow his body language to align their findings with the political objectives of the president, which may include the targeting of opponents or covering up administration failures. This is the reason why in Nigeria, after an administration ended, most principal officers of that administration including heads of security and intelligence agencies are usually arrested and detained on cases of corruption and security/intelligence related crimes. Some of such cases are in the arrest and incarceration of former NSA (Colonel Dasuki rtd.) after the administration of President Jonathan in 2015 (Onuah, 2015); the arrest and detention of the Chairman of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), and the Attorney General and Minister of Justice under President Buhari recently under current administration (Akinkuotu, 2023; Igbintade, 2025).

The elite theory on its own explains how a small, cohesive group holds the majority of political power and acts in its own self-interest rather than the state interest. Its proponents include Vilfredo Pareto (1935), Gaetano Mosca (1939), Robert Michaels (1965), and C. Wright Mills (1956) of the modern elite theory. They argue that society is always divided into a powerful few or a ruling minority (elites) and an unorganized and powerless majority (masses) (Pareto, 1935; Mosca, 1939). The Elites includes the political, economic and military elites describe as the “triad of power” dominate national decision-making by taking full control of the machinery of government, while the unorganized and confused masses remain under their control (Mills, 1956:269). They are present in all societies; even democratic ones have eventually fallen into the rule by a few influential elites as evident in Nigeria where security/intelligence agencies are manipulated to handle crises in a way that favours the ruling political party, especially during elections. Evidence has shown that security and intelligence agencies are involved in election malpractices and election violence to favour their masters in the ruling political party in Nigeria (CLEEN Foundation, 2011; Adebayo, 2020; Obani et al., 2025). This aligns with Mosca (1939) contention of the ruling class using its political influence as a moral and legal justification for its power to manipulate security agencies for their political interests.

In attempting to analyse the impact of politicization of intelligence on national security, the study adopts the structural functionalism theory as developed by Emile Durkheim (1893), Talcott Parsons (1951), and Robert Merton (1968). According to the structural functionalists, politicization of intelligence is a dysfunction of the intelligence organ because it promotes political and personal interest over and above national interest, which often leads to systemic instability (Merton, 1968). The theory further argues that society is like a biological organism where every institution (family,

government, intelligence) is an “organ” that must function correctly for the “body” to survive, emphasizing stability as the ultimate goal (Parsons, 1951:196). This aligns with Durkheim's (1893) description of society as a complex system of interdependent parts, of which any dysfunction (which describes politicization) of any part (including intelligence) affects the entire body. For instance, if the intelligence services stop providing fact and start serving political interests, the social equilibrium breaks, leading to systemic insecurity such as armed banditry, kidnapping for ransom, insurgency, and separatist movement being witnessed in Nigeria. This implies that the systemic instability facing Nigeria since the return to democracy over the past two decades could be attributed to dysfunction in the dispensation of national security, due to the manipulation of intelligence.

Drawing on the holistic appreciation of the logics of the principal-agent theory, elite theory, and structural functionalist theory to explain the politicisation of intelligence in Nigeria and its national security implications, it becomes clear that to capture the full spectrum of the problem, a theoretical triangulation (mixing theories) is necessary. No single theory can account for the institutional mechanics, the power dynamics, and the resulting systemic failures simultaneously. While the elite theory explains the sociological driver behind the politicisation of intelligence in Nigeria by the powerful ruling or elite class for their own personal interest against national security interest, the principal-agent theory explains the operational process underlying the contractual relationship between the President (principal) and the Intelligence Chiefs (agents). Structural functionalism, on the other hand, provides the framework to analyse the impact on national security, underscoring the intelligence community as a vital organ within the Nigerian state, which, when politicised, the entire social system loses its equilibrium and collapses into instability. This explains why Nigeria continues to face insecurity despite high security spending: the function of intelligence has been diverted from national protection to political regime protection, leading to systemic failure.

Overview of Nigeria's Intelligence Landscape

Nigeria's intelligence landscape is a multi-layered framework governed primarily by the National Security Agencies Act of 1986. It transitioned from a colonial-era police surveillance model to a specialized triple-agency system designed to address modern internal, foreign, and military threats. The core of the landscape consists of three specialized services that replaced the centralized National Security Organization (NSO) established by Decree 27 of 1976. It is important to note that the establishment of the NSO was to overhaul and unify the country's fragmented security architecture following the assassination of Head of State General Murtala Mohammed during the abortive 1976 coup led by Lieutenant Colonel B.S. Dimka on 13 February 1976 (Teniola, 2020). Decree 27 of 1976 created the Office of the Director General of NSO, with clearly defined objectives which include prevention and detection of any crime against the security of Nigeria, protection and preservation of all classified matter concerning or relating to the security of Nigeria, and such other purposes, whether within or outside



Nigeria as the Head of the Federal Military Government may deem necessary, with a view to securing the maintenance of the security of Nigeria (NSO Decree, 1976). However, the period witnessed two successful coup d'états (the overthrow of Alhaji Shehu Shagari in 1979 and General Muhammadu Buhari in 1985) (Siollun, 2023; Omoigui, 2015)

Shortly after the second coup that ousted General Buhari which culminated in the emergence of General Ibrahim Babangida in 1985. On June 5 1986, General Babangida enacted the National Security Agency (NSA) Decree. The NSA Decree abolished the NSO, creating three new agencies: State Security Service (SSS) (also known presently as the Department of State Service - DSS), National Intelligence Agency (NIA), and Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), which comprises the three specialised services established to replace the centralised NSO. It also created the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) to serve as the primary coordinating body for all intelligence (NSA, 1986). As part of the reform, the staff of the NSO were absorbed into these new agencies, while the personnel of the internal security directorate were inherited by the SSS, the personnel of the external intelligence directorate were absorbed by the NIA.

It is remarkable to note that 40 years after the 1986 reform of the intelligence landscape that resulted in the emergence of the SSS, NIA, DIA, and the NSA, it remains the only comprehensive reform ever conducted by any government in terms of national security and intelligence. In 2004, the NSA Decree was formally codified into the Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, Cap 74, transforming it into an Act and becoming a significant factor for the government to streamline intelligence operations in the country. The agencies were assigned different but complementary roles in the overall intelligence inputs toward enhancing national security.

The Agencies and their Specialized Services

The State Security Service/Department of State Service (SSS/DSS) by the NSA Act Cap 74 of 1986/2004 focuses on domestic intelligence. Its mandate includes preventing and detection within Nigeria of any crime against the internal security of Nigeria, protecting and preserving non-military classified matters concerning internal security of Nigeria, and such other responsibilities affecting internal security (such as counterterrorism) within Nigeria as the Assembly or the President, Commander-In-Chief of the Armed Forces may deem necessary. The Agency is further empowered with additional responsibilities under the Legal Instrument No SSS 1 of 1999, which states that without prejudice to the generality of the provision relating to the general duties of the DSS set out in Section 2-3 of the Act, and to ensure the protection of the State and its officials, citizens, critical resources and infrastructure from domestic threats (DSS, 2021).

The National Intelligence Agency (NIA), by the NSA Act of 2004, as amended, is responsible for foreign intelligence and counter-intelligence operations outside Nigeria that are not related to military issues. It monitors external threats and handles diplomatic security missions, and its mission is to ensure the principal objective of protection, promotion and enhancement of Nigeria's policy objectives outside Nigeria. Its functions as stipulated in the NSA Act 2004 include: obtaining by covert sources or other means,

external intelligence on the activities of Nigerians or any person, organization or country outside Nigeria whose conduct (or activities) is aimed at bringing disrespect to Nigeria and her leaders or undermining the security of Nigeria; obtaining by covert sources or other means, external intelligence that is capable of advancing Nigeria's vital interest; identifying and assisting in the apprehension of persons outside Nigeria believed to have committed any crime against the security of Nigeria; monitoring the intentions, activities and policies of foreign countries/governments towards Nigeria and Nigerians; monitoring any external plans or acts of subversion, sabotage or terrorism against Nigeria, its economy or its people; conducting espionage, covert operations and counterintelligence activities outside Nigeria; collection, collation, analysis, projections/estimations and research on external intelligence in relation to political, socio-economic, technological and security matters; provision of protection in liaison with host security services for the President and other VIPs in the Nigerian government who are on visit overseas; and performing such other functions as may be given by the President, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria.

The Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), by the NSA Act is charged with military intelligence. It handles the prevention of military-natured crimes, protection of military classified matters, and provides tactical intelligence for the Armed Forces of Nigeria (NSA Act, 2004, as amended). The establishing Authority further assigned the following roles to the Defence Intelligence Agency: Detection and prevention of crimes of a military nature against the security of Nigeria; protection and preservation of all military classified matters concerning the security of Nigeria, both within and outside Nigeria such other responsibilities as may be assigned by the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces or the Chief of the Defence Staff as may deem necessary. It is important to note that this third responsibility is omnibus in nature (NSA Act, 2004).

The Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA), on the other hand, serves as the primary coordinating body for all intelligence. It also derives its powers from the NSA Act and its responsibilities as spelt out in the Act includes: To determine national intelligence priorities and direct the appropriate agencies for the collection and collation of national intelligence priorities; to collate and control the national intelligence budget as well as the supervision of its implementation by agencies through fiscal and other measures; to direct the production of intelligence reports on any subject of interest, produce intelligence reports on issues of national concern and disseminate the reports to appropriate government agencies and functionaries; protection of national intelligence estimates from submissions of the intelligence agencies; maintaining data on equipment, persons or groups of persons who are of interest to Nigeria; and arranging intelligence sharing and cooperation with other government and foreign intelligence agencies (NSA Act, 2004).

All the agencies (SSS/DSS, NIA, DIA, and ONSA) comprise Nigeria's intelligence landscape, and their main purpose is to provide intelligence to policymakers that may help inform their national security decision options. The DSS and NIA report directly to the President, while the DIA reports to the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). The framework

that guides the operations of these intelligence agencies is the National Security Strategy, developed by the ONSA, which was first published in 2014 and reviewed in 2019 to address emerging threats like banditry and kidnapping.

Nigeria's Intelligence Cycle Model

The intelligence cycle is a universal process amongst intelligence community. It is a planned methodological and logical process geared towards performing four primary tasks for the government, which include avoiding strategic surprise; supporting government long-term planning, and ensuring that government information, methods and processes are kept secret (Lowenthal, 2020). Performing these tasks requires a rigorous understanding and assessment of an adversary's capabilities, intentions, and possible reactions. In Nigeria, the intelligence cycle has four steps: planning & direction, collection, processing, and dissemination & use. This general framework is captured in the National Security Framework (2004) as follows:

Planning and Direction

Policymakers and commanders define their information needs and priorities. This is the management phase where critical intelligence gaps are identified, and priority intelligence requirements (PIRs) are established to guide the entire cycle. The NSA and heads of intelligence agencies define the "Key Intelligence Topics" (KITs) and "Key Intelligence Questions" (KIQs) based on threats such as Boko Haram, banditry, kidnapping, and separatist movements. Once the direction has been set, the intelligence agencies begin to collect the necessary data to meet the guidance set out by policymakers.

Collection

This is the stage that sets the intelligence cycle in motion, without which subsequent stages cannot take place. It is the stage in which raw data/information from various sources is gathered. Information collected during this stage in Nigeria relies heavily on HUMINT (Human Intelligence), which often faces challenges from community mistrust or fear of reprisal. Other sources include SIGINT (Signal Intelligence), OSINT (Open-Source Intelligence), MASINT (Measurements and Signatures Intelligence), and increasingly, technological surveillance, such as GEOINT (Geospatial Intelligence) or IMINT (Imagery Intelligence) (e.g., satellite photography), although these are often hampered by outdated equipment. Data and information collected from many disciplines means that collectors can leverage the strengths and weaknesses of the disciplines to achieve optimal effects.

Processing

This involves the conversion of information collected from diverse sources (local dialects, signal intercepts) into intelligence, which includes language translation,

decryption of signals, data reduction, and organizing information into files or databases. It is carried out through three closely related steps: collection, evaluation, and interpretation. The evaluation step is to ensure the reliability of the source and credibility of information gathered, which is fundamental for analyzing the judgment of relative value to determine how different or conflicting the reports are. Interpretation is the final step in the processing phase. It focuses on deductive reasoning, body language, and existing materials, which play major roles in producing intelligence products. The processing stage is crucial for reducing the volume of information into manageable data for analysis to provide the most complete, accurate and objective view. For instance, analysts within agencies like the DIA or Criminal Investigation Bureau (CIB) contextualize data to identify patterns, evaluate the reliability of sources, and create actionable intelligence reports.

Dissemination and Use

This is the last stage of the intelligence cycle in Nigeria, where the finished intelligence product is delivered to policymakers and security operators. In Nigeria, intelligence is passed to consumers, such as the President, Service Chiefs, or Joint Task Force (JTF) commanders, as the case may be, for decision-making. It comes in the form of reports, briefings, or alerts shared with policymakers or commanders promptly to inform their decisions. Timeliness is critical here to enable proactive rather than reactive operations. At this stage, the consumers can evaluate the utility of intelligence; if it is not actionable, the cycle can be restarted for better planning and direction.

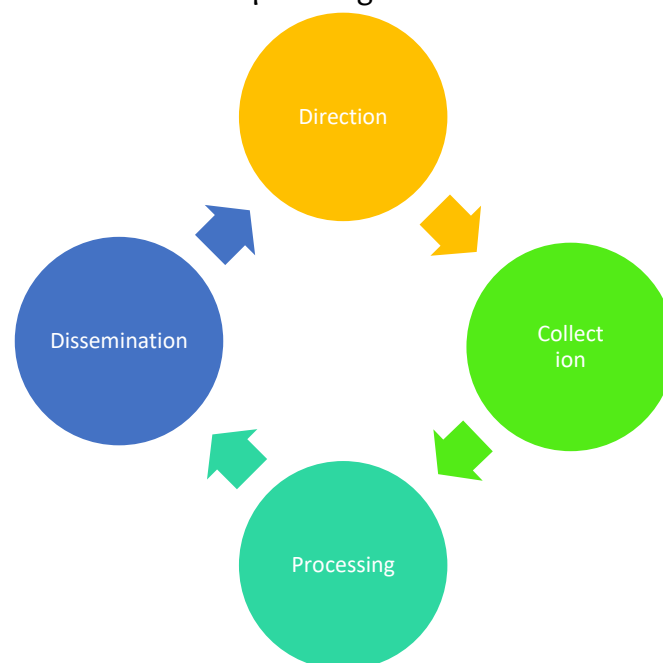


Figure 1: Nigeria's Intelligence Cycle Model. Source: Researcher's Design, 2026.

The Politicization of Intelligence in Nigeria

Intelligence politicization has been one of the major problems undermining national security in Nigeria since the post-independence to the present democratic era. It stems from inherited colonial governance structures, intense zero-sum political competition, frequent military interventions, and systemic corruption. Rather than operating as neutral protectors of national security, intelligence bodies have routinely been co-opted to serve incumbent regimes and factional interests at the detriment of national interest and national security. Although the intelligence landscape has overtime been restructured to ensure effective coordination of the intelligence bodies for enhance national security (from Decree 27 of 1976 to NSA Decree of 1986 and several other reforms on security sector governance), the structure has focus more on protecting the regimes rather than threats and vulnerabilities that tend to cripple or weaken national values, boundaries and institutions or the overall well-being of the citizens. This has resulted to several unsavoury tendencies in the dispensation of national security, including the manipulation of intelligence findings and security apparatuses to serve political interests rather than national security, resulting in flawed threat assessments, partisan targeting, and eroding of public trust in Nigerian security services. Agencies like the DSS, NIA, DIA, and the Nigerian Police often see the intelligence cycles distorted, leading to inefficiencies in the dispensation of national security objectives. Key aspects of this phenomenon include the following:

Partisan Framing of Security Threats

One major aspect of the phenomenon of intelligence politicization in Nigeria is the partisan framing of security threats. Political actors often exploit security crises, such as Boko Haram insurgencies or act of terrorism or farmer-herder conflicts, to downplay risks in specific regions or discredit political opponents, undermining impartial conflict resolution. Just like previous administrations, the current administration has accused and arrested some of the key opposition leaders for money laundering and terrorism financing. Recently, former Attorney General of the Federation under the previous administration, who defected to the opposition African Democratic Congress (ADC) was detained by DSS for terrorism financing and sabotage-related activities (Igbintade, 2025). Also, the former Governor of Kaduna State, Mallam El-Rufai (formerly a chieftain of the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) and now a Chieftain of the rival ADC) was recently detained by the DSS on charges of unlawful tapping of the NSA phone line (Arise, 2026).

Institutional Capture & Regime Protection

In Nigeria, institutional capture and regime protection represent the structural and operational mechanisms by which intelligence agencies are diverted from national security to serve the interests of the political elite. Institutional capture occurs when political actors gain control over the leadership, recruitment, and funding of intelligence

agencies, transforming them into extensions of the ruling party or the presidency. When institutions of intelligence are captured, resources, intelligence, and enforcement power may be directed at political rivals rather than security threats, reducing public trust and institutional legitimacy (Bashir & Jibril, 2025). The leadership roles in agencies like the DSS and NIA are often filled based on political loyalty rather than professional merit for which it was known. This creates a leadership culture beholden to the appointing authority, which can lead to the “skipping of the line” in promotions and a breakdown of professional standards. Regime protection, on the other hand, is the prioritization of the survival and interests of the current administration over broader national security concerns. This often results in the manipulation of intelligence to favour the ruling elites’ interests as conceptualised by Mosca’s (1939) theory.

Manipulation and Suppression of Intelligence

This is a situation where intelligence findings are frequently altered or hidden to align with political agendas, creating a policy-based evidence scenario rather than evidence-based policy, as observed by the political-agent theorists. In such a situation, intelligence agents prioritize pleasing their political masters over national security interests, leading to abuse of intelligence (Nte, 2011: 1000). This weakens the ability of law enforcement to fight major security challenges. For instance, reports of high-profile security incidents, such as ransom payments for kidnapped students, are often dismissed as ‘fake’ by officials, despite conflicting reports from security experts. In addition, there is a recurring pattern in Nigeria where intelligence is used to ‘project a unified narrative’ that favours the government. This can involve downplaying security failures or framing incidents like the resurgence of the Boko Haram/ISWAP terrorist group in a way that minimizes political fallout for the administration.

Surveillance of Political Opposition and Media

In Nigeria, the surveillance of political opposition and media is a critical component of the politicization of intelligence, where security agencies are often perceived as prioritizing regime protection over national security and human rights such as freedom of speech. This manifests through the use of sophisticated digital tools, the weaponization of legislation, and physical intimidation (Feldstein, 2019; Yelwa & Umar, 2025). Daily Trust Editorial report of 27 July 2021, noted that intelligence agencies across 10 countries have invested heavily in technologies such as “Spyware” designed to intercept private communications, often without clear legal warrants, though Nigeria was not mentioned (Daily Trust, 2021). However, on its part, the Nigerian government has continued to increase budgetary allocations to surveillance technology. In 2021, the federal government allocated N4.8 billion to the NIA to procure equipment that will monitor WhatsApp messages, phone calls, and text messages (WIN, 2023). WIN report also reported that both federal and state-level actors have procured foreign hacker-for-hire spyware to monitor political opponents, particularly during election cycles, and more than ever before, journalists are monitored when they are online, and when they

are not, they are followed; journalists' email and social media handles are hacked (WIN, 2023). In the same vein, the Media Rights Agenda (MRA) 2025 report observed that in 2025, government officials and security agencies, including the DSS and Police, were reportedly responsible for approximately 74 per cent of all recorded violations of media freedom (APA News, 2025). This is also applicable to opposition political party leaders, a situation that has significantly affected intelligence management and altered the dispensation of national security.

Leadership and Institutional Disruption

Leadership and institutional disruption in Nigeria's intelligence sector are characterised by a 'revolving door' of leadership and the prioritization of political loyalty over institutional memory. This creates a cycle where agencies are frequently reorganized to suit the current administration, often at the expense of long-term strategic stability. Since 2023, the Nigerian President, Chief Bola Tinubu, has implemented multiple major reshuffles of security and intelligence chiefs, including a significant sweep in October 2025 (State House Press Release, 2025). Experts argue that while new appointments are framed as "injecting new blood" (Chibunna, 2025), they often lead to a loss of institutional memory. A persistent challenge is the appointment of intelligence leaders based on political, religious, or ethnic affiliations rather than professional qualifications. It undermines the independence and objectivity of these leadership positions, often resulting in biased decision-making that prioritizes career aspirations and the political survival of the regime over operational efficiency.

Weak Oversight and Accountability

Weak oversight and accountability are primary drivers of the politicization of intelligence, creating a "culture of secrecy" that allows agencies like the DSS and NIA to be used for regime protection rather than national security (Bashir & Jibril, 2025: 8983). Legislative oversight helps bridge the gap between citizens and government, supports effective security sector policy implementation, and builds public trust (Aluko, 2015; Dan-Azumi, 2020). So, when those who are expected to supervise the activities of intelligence agencies decide to ignore, it breeds a culture of impunity and entrenches partisan uses of security (Abdulrasheed, 2021). Despite massive security budgets reaching over N17 trillion between 2021 and 2025, there is often a lack of transparency in how these funds are utilized for intelligence, leading to recurring failures (The Cable, 2026). The Auditor-General's reports frequently highlight billions in unaccounted funds within the security sector, yet these findings rarely lead to prosecutions or structural changes (Gbahabo et al., 2024). The consequences have been the loss of public trust and declining operational efficiency.

National Security Implications of the Politicization of Intelligence In Nigeria

The politicization of intelligence in Nigeria significantly shifts the focus of security agencies from protecting the state to protecting the interests of political elites and/or regime security. This often manifests through the manipulation of threat assessments, partisan deployment during elections, and arbitrary and/or misuse of surveillance technology. This phenomenon frequently results in the weaponization of security institutions against political opposition, the neglect of urgent national security threats, and the erosion of public trust in state institutions. The key implications include:

Worsening Insecurity and Intelligence Failures

Worsening insecurity and intelligence failure are major implications of politicized intelligence. When intelligence focus shifts to political survival, national security is undermined. The rising increase in security challenges across the country is attributable to politicized intelligence. A good example is the recent spreading of violent extremism and kidnapping for ransom across the country despite the heavy presence of joint task operations ongoing in all the six geopolitical zones of the country (IWC, 2025). On Tuesday, February 3, 2026, Woro village in Kwara state was attacked by suspected bandits and over 170 persons were kidnapped and scores massacred, due to unheeded intelligence regarding the movement of bandits into the state after the United States bombing of their enclaves in the Northwest region of Nigeria on the eve of Christmas in 2025 (Omonobi et al., 2026). It was reported that the bandits had notified the village of the attack, which was communicated through a letter brought directly to the village head and sent to the DSS office in the state. Unfortunately, nothing was done to prevent the attack until it happened (Omonobi et al., 2026). Another striking incident is the abduction of 40 school students of Government Girls Comprehensive Secondary School, Maga, Gombe State, by bandits in November 2025 (Abdullah, 2025). Incidentally, the incident happened 45 minutes after the withdrawal of troops guarding the school, but no one has come out to taken responsibility of withdrawing the troops from the school. Also, the Abuja-Kaduna train attack, which resulted in a mass kidnap-for-ransom scheme, was reportedly preceded by unheeded intelligence regarding the movement of bandits (EU-SDGN, 2023). These are incidents of politicized intelligence because there was evidence that security operatives had all intelligence to repel the attacks but chose to stay off, due to interests which definitely were not for the country's national security interest.

Erosion of Institutional Legitimacy and Public Trust

One major implication of the politicization of intelligence is that it weakens the legitimacy of state institutions and undermines public trust in the government's capacity to protect national interests. In Nigeria, reports have shown that intelligence agencies such as the DSS and Nigeria Police have been consistently used by successful governments for political repression, arresting of political opposition and dissent voices, monitoring opposition figures, and influencing election outcomes (Adebayo, 2020; Yiaga Africa, 2023; Igbintade, 2025). The implications have been the continuous loss of

institutional legitimacy and public trust. The public see them as an extended wings of the ruling party rather than national security apparatuses for safeguarding the state and citizens. This has reduced public willingness to share actionable information that can assist security agencies in containing the increasing insecurity across the country. The calls by several ethnic groups for people to take up arms and defend themselves against criminal herders across the country during President Muhammadu Buhari's administration were based on the perception that he was partial in addressing herders' attacks because they are his tribesmen (Premium Times, 2022; Channel Television, 2021).

Compromised Security Operations and Corruption

The politicization of intelligence in Nigeria has also led to compromised security operations and corruption among agencies. Budgetary allocations, including "security votes" are often mismanaged or diverted for political campaigns, leaving security operatives under-equipped and without the necessary tools for intelligence-driven operations. A striking example is the Dasuki-gate, where the NSA, Col. Dasuki (rtd.), under President Goodluck Jonathan, at the end of the administration, was arrested and prosecuted for diverting millions of dollars meant for the procurement of military hardware to political campaigns and political patronages for the president (Ukaeje, 2022). Another aspect of the implication is inter-agency rivalry between security agencies. Agencies like the Nigeria Police, DSS, and the military often refuse to share critical data/information to avoid being outshone or to protect their specific political patrons. This lack of synergy has been cited by many reports including CLEEN Foundation, 2019; IWC, 2025; Olugbode (2026); as a primary reason why, Nigeria continues to struggle with Boko Haram and ISWAP, as agencies operate in isolation to secure more operational resources. Additionally, it has entrenched rivalry among agencies that each is actively sabotaging the other to protect their "turf" or please political masters, preventing the necessary synergy for effective operations. Instances of sabotage by security agencies against each other are documented in several reports (Bodunde & Balogun, 2018; CLEEN Foundation, 2019; IWC, 2025).

Undermining Democracy and Rule of Law

Undermining democratic principles and the rule of law is another consequence of intelligence politicization. In Nigeria, security and intelligence agencies are often used by the ruling party to intimidate other arms of government, especially when they seem to stick to professionalism and not align with the political dictates of the ruling elites. Ordinary political issues are often elevated to national security threats to delegitimize opposition and justify illegal arrests or repression. In 2016, for instance, operatives of the Department of State Services carried out "sting operations", midnight raids on the homes of several senior judges, including Supreme Court Justices, over allegations of corruption. While the government framed it as an anti-corruption drive to purge the judiciary of corrupt judges, the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) and critics condemned

it as an effort towards intimidating the judiciary towards subverting the cause of justice to the favour of the ruling party (Thisday, 2016). In 2019 and 2023 General Elections, there were widespread reports of security agencies being used to provide cover for political thugs, snatch ballot boxes, or intimidate voters in opposition strongholds (Yiaga Africa, 2023). Specifically, academic studies on the 2023 elections in states like Oyo State highlights partisanship among security personnel, which directly discouraged voter participation and fuelled public distrust (Ikwuoma & Akinlabi, 2025). These are clear cases of where politicized intelligence has undermined democratic principles and rule of law. Incidentally, they have continued to play out unabated particularly in election of public officers.

Socio-Economic Dislocations

Another major implication of intelligence politicization is socioeconomic dislocations. In Nigeria, the unprofessional behaviour of security agencies in addressing serious security concerns, such as insurgency, terrorism, separatism, militancy, herders/farmers clash, and other security related matters due to consistent interference by the political elites has created severe socio-economic dislocations, including decline in economic growth and development, reduction in socio-economic investments, and humanitarian crises. The Nation Newspaper editorial of August 13, 2023 observed that banditry and terrorism in northern Nigeria have caused the displacement of an estimated 3.6 million persons at the end of 2022, with 40 per cent of the displaced persons living in 309 IDP Camps or camp-like settlements and 60 per cent in 2,072 host communities in Nigeria with severe consequences of food security (The Nation, 2023). Also, in the southeast geopolitical zone, the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) separatist sit-at-home order, restraining citizens across the entire southeast zone from doing business on Mondays has crippled the local economies in the states of region. The SB Morgan (2025) report on sit-at-home orders in southeast Nigeria revealed that the order has caused cumulative economic loss estimated at ₦7.6 trillion to ₦17 trillion between 2021 and 2025. This loss has severely impacted both the local and national economies including social livelihood of residents in the region.

Recommendations

Considering the aforementioned theory on intelligence and national security as well as the positioning of intelligence as a critical enabler of national security for a country, the following recommendations are proposed for Nigeria to curb the politicization of intelligence agencies:

- 1. Security of Tenure for Intelligence Chiefs:** The National Security Agencies Act (1986) should be amended to ensure that the Director-Generals of the DSS and NIA have a fixed, non-renewable term. Their removal should require a two-thirds majority in the Senate to prevent arbitrary dismissal for political reasons.
- 2. Legislative Oversight on Intelligence Agencies:** The National Assembly's Committee on Intelligence and Security must move beyond 'rubber-stamping' budgets. They should



conduct closed-door investigative hearings on operational failures and mandate detailed audit of Security Votes to ensure funds are not diverted for partisan activities. Nigeria should possibly establish a National Assembly Committee on Public Accounts to which all arms of government must report on spending of public funds.

3. Establishment of an Independent Oversight Body: Create an independent Intelligence Ombudsman or a civilian oversight board composed of retired jurists, academics, and security experts. This body would investigate complaints of human rights abuses and political surveillance without being tied to the executive branch of government. This should be included in a revision of the national legislation on intelligence in Nigeria.

4. Codifying Inter-Agency Cooperation: The Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) should be legally empowered to enforce a unified intelligence-sharing protocol. Failure to share actionable intelligence between the police, military, and DSS should be categorized as professional misconduct subject to sanction.

5. Professionalization and Ethical Training: Intelligence training and education curricula should be overhauled to emphasize constitutionalism and the role of intelligence in a democracy. Operatives must be trained to distinguish between political opposition (which is legal) and subversion (which is criminal). Such professionalisation could follow the path which is associated with civil-military relations, maybe label it civil-intelligence relations.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing analysis of the politicization of intelligence in Nigeria, it is obvious that the primary objective of intelligence in Nigeria, as established by the National Security Agencies Act of 1986 (as reviewed in 2004), which is the effective conduct of national security through the specialized mandates of three distinct agencies (DSS, NIA & DIA) has been abandoned or given little attention due to politics. The heads of intelligence agencies serve at the pleasure of the President, making them personally loyal to the individual rather than the office or the Constitution. Until the incentive structure changes, moving from rewarding political loyalty to rewarding professional efficacy, intelligence will remain a weapon of the ruling class rather than a shield for the citizenry. This 'intelligence capture' not only undermines the rule of law but also effectively privatizes national security, leaving the general population vulnerable to non-state actors.

Conflict of interest

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

Notes on Contributor

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Ethnic Social Movements and the Mobilisation for Militancy in Nigeria: A Case of the Ombatse Movement in Eggonland¹

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Abstract:

Ethnic social movements have long been associated with militant activities in post-independence Nigeria and identity is one of the mechanisms with which they mobilise for collective action. Using data from primary and secondary sources, this paper examines the construction and utilisation of collective identity by the Ombatse movement for the mobilisation of support in Eggonland, and the deployment of militancy in Nasarawa State of Nigeria. The Ombatse identity was built around the Ashim religious belief system of the Eggon people and portrayed as a revival of ancestral practices aimed at cleansing the Eggon people from moral vices and misfortunes. This identity attracted many Eggon people because it converged with their other identities, including as practicing Christians and Muslims. It also promised to clean out social vices, witchcraft, evil and misfortunes from Eggonland. Symbolic rituals and practices were used by the movement to build group solidarity and demarcate insiders from outsiders. The resultant widespread support attracted by the movement enabled it to mobilise its members for collective action in protecting the interests of the Eggon ethnic group. This resulted in their assumption of a sustained militant posture that brought the movement into violent conflicts with other ethnic groups and the Nasarawa State government. The paper concludes that collective identity was a powerful mechanism for the mobilisation for support by the Ombatse movement as well as for the deployment of militancy in Nasarawa State. Nonetheless, the resultant growth, popularity and militant activities of the movement also contributed towards its eventual decline.

Keywords:

Ombatse Movement; Eggonland; Social Movement; Collective Identity; Ethnic Militancy.

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Introduction

Social Movements have existed as long as agitation and conflict existed in human history and identity has been central to their existence. Globally, people have struggled against real or perceived threats of various kinds through movements. In Africa, several movements have been developed during the colonial period with the aim of bringing an end to colonial domination. The end of colonialism, however, did not mark the end of agitations in the continent. New forms of agitations soon emerged as groups compete with each other, mostly on political, economic and social basis, prompting the establishment of social movements. In Nigeria, ethnicity is a common basis on which support for militancy is mobilised and deployed through the exploitation of collective identity. Relying on data from primary and secondary sources, this paper examines how the Ombatse movement constructed and utilised collective identity to mobilise support for agitation and militancy in Nigeria. It begins with a clarification of the concepts of ethnicity, social movement and collective identity. This is followed by a background discourse on ethnic social movements, identity and militancy in post-colonial Nigeria. Finally, the work focuses on the Ombatse movement of Eggonland and how it constructed and utilised collective identity to mobilise support from the Eggon people which in turn enabled it to assume a militant posture in Nasarawa State of Nigeria.

Clarification of Concepts

In the course of this paper certain key concepts will be employed. Therefore, it is important to clarify some of these concepts in order to provide an insight into their meanings and the context in which they are used. These concepts are ethnicity, social movement and collective identity. These are discussed below:

Ethnicity: Ethnicity as a concept is broadly understood as the state of being an ethnic group. However, it has no generally accepted definition and so it is understood in different ways by different people. For instance, Tersoo and Ejue (2015) present the view that ethnicity means the state of people-hood that is held by a group, sharing a common culture and history within the society. This definition is clearly too broad to serve our purpose here effectively and so we turn to Badmus (2006) who sees ethnicity in a different way as;

“A belief in common historical evolution provides an inheritance of symbols, heroes, events, values, and hierarchies and confirms the social identities for separating both insiders and outsiders. Ethnic culture is one of the important ways people conceive of themselves and culture and identity are closely intertwined.”
(p. 192).

This perspective broadens our understanding and also introduces the concepts of culture and identity which are inherent part of ethnicity. Indeed, culture and identity are some of the important components that define an ethnic group. These provide the understanding that ethnicity is linked with how a group of people see themselves as

distinct from other groups based on the identity they share which is derived from a common ancestral origin, kinship, tradition, culture, language, territoriality and others. It is often on the basis of identity that socialization and mobilisation takes place among ethnic groups.

Social Movement: Social movements have taken various forms over time and space and so they are understood in different ways by different people. Blumer, as cited in Crossley (2002), defines a social movement as;

“Collective enterprises seeking to establish a new order of life. They have their inception in a condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new system of living. The career of a social movement depicts the emergence of a new order of life.” (p. 3).

This definition draws our attention to the idea that the need for a new order of life is the motive behind the emergence of social movements. This idea is further expanded by Godwin and Jasper, as cited in Parvanova and Pichler (2013) that the efforts to bring about the new order of life must be sustained over time to qualify as that of a social movement. This helps to separate social movements from spontaneous, one-off actions riots or mob actions. Donatella and Diani (2006) further enrich our understanding with the opinion that social movements “are a distinct social process, consisting of the mechanisms through which actors engaged in collective action: (1) are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; (2) are linked by dense informal networks; (3) share a distinct collective identity” (p. 20). This view introduces the idea that, in addition to sustained efforts, those seeking a new order of life must have clearly identified opponents, dense informal network and distinct collective identity to qualify as a social movement. Based on this perspective, therefore, many of the ethnic movements in Nigeria qualify as social movements.

Collective Identity: In social movement theory, collective identity is central to the mobilisation of people for collective action. It creates recognition, connectedness and raises a “sense of common purpose and shared commitment to a cause” (Donatella & Diani, 2006: 21). Poletta and Jasper (2001) view collective identity “as an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity” (p. 285). It forms the wall with which boundaries are constructed to define who belongs inside and who belongs outside of a movement. There is no doubt that unless collective identity is developed and maintained the social movement process cannot be complete.



Ethnic Social Movements, Identity and Militancy in Nigeria: A Background

Identity is a major factor with which ethnic groups define themselves in relation to others. Thus, there is no separating ethnicity from identity. There is no doubt, however, that the negative exploitation of identity has resulted in conflict between some of the different ethnic groups living together in Nigeria. Nonetheless, the temptation to assume that conflict was inevitable in such an ethnically diverse society is unfounded. This is because ethnic plurality is not in itself a problem but rather the negative exploitation of it is what constitutes a problem. The negative exploitation of ethnic diversity and identity to inequitably share common resources is what often leads to ethnic conflicts (Nwabueze, 2014). This tendency towards the exploitation of ethnic identity for the distribution of power and resources in Nigeria, which favours some groups, gives rise to agitation among the ethnic groups that feel disadvantaged by the process. Ethnic agitation can be manifested in several ways ranging from suspicion and mild hostility to physical violence towards groups and individuals that are perceived to be threats. In extreme cases, however, the formation of ethnic based social movements can occur and sometimes result in militancy.

Social movements of various kinds, hinged on identity, have existed for some time in Nigeria though they are sometimes referred to as ethnic militia movements (Olayode, 2011). For instance, Fayeye (2004), while acknowledging the impossibility of having a detailed list of “ethnic militias” in the country, because of the high number of ethnic groups, listed some ethnic militias to include Oodua People’s Congress (OPC), Bakassi Boys, Egbesu Boys, Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Niger-Delta Youth Movement, Plateau Youth, Benue/Tiv Youth Movement, Jukun Youth Movement, Kano-based Atjid Movement, and Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). However, it is easily seen that this list provided is problematic because some groups in the list are not necessarily ethnic based. Obviously terms such as “Plateau Youth Movement” and “Niger-Delta Youth Movement” do not refer to specific ethnic groups but to political and geographical entities that might have members from several ethnic groups. Nonetheless, these political and geographical entities provided the basis for identity construction and formation of social movements.

The emergence of ethnic and other forms of social movements in Nigeria has been attributed to several factors by commentators. One of such is the view that the decades of dictatorship, marginalisation, injustice and bad governance by military rule triggered the formation of these movements as extra-constitutional means for addressing the difficult conditions being experienced (Gilbert, 2013; Shittu, 2013). Indeed, the OPC is said to have been formed as a result of dissatisfaction over the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential election in Nigeria which is believed to have been won by M. K. O. Abiola, a member of the Yoruba ethnic group. MASSOB was formed in 2000 as a result of the perceived marginalisation of the Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria. Similarly, Bakassi Boys was formed in 1999 to provide vigilante and security services for the traders in Onitsha market (Oronsaye & Igbafe, 2012). While these movements were formed for different reasons, identity remains the common denominator shared by them. While

OPC was built around the Yoruba ethnic identity, MASSOB and Bakassi Boys were based on the Igbo ethnic identity.

The exploitation of identity for mobilisation by social movements have enabled them to receive the ethnic support and legitimacy needed to assume militant postures against perceived opponents such as other ethnic groups, as well as the government and its agencies. For example, the widespread support enjoyed by the OPC within the Yoruba ethnic group has contributed to its militant posture and activities in western Nigeria. The movement had been involved in several violent clashes such as the Ketu/Mile 12 market clash of 25 to 26 November, 1999 where many people were killed mostly from the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups from northern Nigeria. The movement also clashed with police in Ilorin on 14 October, 2000 where many its members were killed and arrested (Guichaoua, 2006). These kinds of violent conflicts often caused a chain reaction where other groups sometimes formed their own social movements or militia units in order to protect their own interests. For instance, the formation of the short-lived Arewa People's Congress in December 1999 by the Hausa people was specifically to checkmate the militancy of the OPC (Agbu, 2004).

The Ombatse Movement in Eggonland

Eggonland is geographically located within latitude 8.45° N and longitude 8.30° E in an area, inhabited by the Eggon ethnic group, known today as Nassarawa Eggon Local Government Area of Nasarawa State in Nigeria (Alumbugu, 2025). The Ombatse was an ethnic social movement that evolved among the Eggon ethnic group in and around this area. The movement, which became known in 2011, has been variously described as a traditional religion, a prayer group, a religious cult, and an ethnic militia. Some leaders of the group were responsible for referring to it as a traditional prayer group. Others, such as McGregor (2013) and Joseph (2013) refer to the group both as a cult and a militia. Ukoli and Uhembe (2014) go a step further to argue that the movement is a cult and not a militia as stated by some commentators. Indeed, the movement did have within it an armed militia unit, however, since its scope of membership and activities went far broader than the militia, it is better described as an ethnic social movement. This stance is based on the fact that the Ombatse was involved in relations of conflict with identifiable opponents (such as the Fulani, Alago, Migili and the Nasarawa State Government), had a dense informal network within and outside Eggonland, and had a collective identity that was clearly distinct (Diani, 2006). In addition, the movement was a sustained collective enterprise that sought to bring about a new way of life in Eggonland (Crossley, 2002).

The Ombatse movement has gained negative popularity, particularly because of its involvement in some infamous events such as the killing of over 70 security agents near Alakyo village. As a result, it attracted wide media and scholarly interest and commentaries. In spite of this, there are divergent opinions regarding the reason behind its emergence. Some available written sources offer the explanation that the Ombatse was formed as a result of a revelation received in a dream “to purify society and rid it



of social evils such as promiscuity, adultery, crime, alcohol consumption and smoking” (Philip, 2015: 31). Ayuba (2014) proposes an alternative explanation that the movement was a political organisation formed after the 2007 Governorship election in Nasarawa State by some Eggon elites in an attempt to create a unified political front for the Eggon people.

There is also the view that part of the reasons for the emergence of the Ombatse was to mobilise the Eggon people against the perceived marginalisation and injustice meted on them in Nasarawa State. This perceived injustice, according to Enna (2015), included mobilisation by those in power and other ethnic groups to frustrate Eggon political aspirations in spite of Eggon numeric advantage, granting more political appointments to other groups while neglecting the Eggon, placing an embargo on employment into the State Civil Service in order to keep out the Eggon while granting secret employments to other groups. In addition, Eggon people located in some parts of the State, such as Lafia, were being harassed by other ethnic groups on the grounds that they did not belong there. Thus, according to this view, the need arose for a movement that would agitate against this perceived marginalisation of the Eggon people. Beyond these views, however, there is no doubt that an important motive behind the emergence of the Ombatse was to mobilise the Eggon people for collective action through the construction and maintenance of an attractive collective identity.

Ombatse Movement, Collective Identity and Mobilisation in Eggonland

In the context of ethnic social movements, ethnicity often serves as the basis on which collective identity is constructed and maintained. This construction and use of collective identity for mobilisation by movements is often deliberate, systematic and involves painstaking work (Tarrow, 2011). Thus, the emergence and growth of the Ombatse movement was as a result of the creation, maintenance and exploitation of the Ombatse identity for mobilising support and legitimacy within the Eggon ethnic group. Although this identity was based on the Eggon ethnic identity, it was a separate identity in the sense that being an Eggon did not automatically make one an Ombatse member. There were steps that must be taken in order to assume the Ombatse identity. The Ombatse identity was effective as a means for mobilising support from the Eggon people because it was deliberately constructed to be an attractive collective identity.

One reason for the attractiveness of the Ombatse identity was the fact that it was constructed around the ancestral religious belief system of the Eggon people known as the *Ashim*. The movement positioned itself as a revival of the *Ashim* by attributing its emergence to a message received from the ancestors to return the Eggon people to their old ways and to sanitise Eggonland of evil and bring about a new way of life. This, according to this belief, was necessary because the misfortunes befalling the Eggon ethnic group were caused by the evil being carried out by the people, and the only way forward was to return to the good ways of their ancestors. Thus, the people must return to their ancestral shrines to pray for forgiveness and protection against the problems affecting them. While positioning itself as a revival of the Eggon traditional belief system,

the Ombatse was careful to build its identity on already existing collective identities in Eggonland. It portrayed itself as a traditional practice, not a religion, and thus encouraged its Christian and Muslim members to continue practicing their religions. This aligns with the opinion of Polletta and Jasper (2001) that movements often try to build their identities on existing independent identities as one way of ensuring solidarity. Consequently, since the Ombatse identity was believed to be synonymous to good morals, it was to both Christianity and Islam and allowed for identity convergence (Snow, 2001). This identity convergence made it possible for the movement to mobilise the support of many Eggon people across existing clan and religion divides. This strategy of appealing to traditional practices by movements, in order to mobilise the support of members of an ethnic group divided by modern religion, was not new. It proved effective when used by the OPC to mobilise Yoruba people who were equally divided by Islam and Christianity (Nolte, 2008).

Initiation rites and collective rituals are important parts of collective identity construction because they not only provide attributes of similarity or “we-ness” that unifies members, but also define the boundaries that demarcate insiders from outsiders (Eisenstadt, 1998). The practice of oath-taking for membership by the Ombatse was the initiation ritual into the movement. This oath-taking practice by the movement served three important purposes. Firstly, it was a ritual of initiation and a symbol of membership which was a necessary step that must be taken before anyone assumed the Ombatse identity. Secondly, the Ombatse oath was believed to provide protection for those who took it against evils including witchcraft and weapons. Thirdly, oath served the purpose of cleansing those who took it from evil and was also believed to prevent them from doing evil. In Eggonland there is a strong fear of witchcraft and many misfortunes are attributed to it (Danfulani, 1999). Therefore, the belief that the Ombatse oath provided protection against witchcraft made it very appealing, making many people to take this oath of membership in order to protect themselves against witchcraft. Some parents even took their children for oath-taking so as to ensure their protection from witchcraft. It was believed that the oath also prevented those who took it from doing evil. Consequently, some families went to the extent of forcing their members to take the oath so that no one would be able to do evil to others. Thus, the Ombatse identity was believed to be synonymous to purity and as a result it became an appealing identity among the Eggon people. Based on this therefore an ideal Ombatse member would be a morally upright Eggon person primarily because anyone who supposedly took the oath would die if he did any evil afterwards (U. Agyo, personal communication, August 16, 2017).

The Ombatse engaged in sustained identity work which entails “the range of activities people engage in, both individually and collectively, to signify and express who they are and what they stand for in relation or contrast to some set of others” (Snow, 2001, p. 8) They developed and practiced a number of symbolic rituals which contributed towards making the Ombatse identity attractive among the Eggon people. One of such rituals was the consumption of special herbs, either through smoking or added to food,



which was central to the membership of the movement. These herbs were believed to provide protection against evil such as witchcraft. Thus, it became usual to see both children and adults smoking the herbs publicly – a practice that was encouraged within the movement which had sole monopoly of preparing and selling these herbs. Black vests and charms were also used as a protective uniform by some members of the movement, especially members of the militia unit (Philip, 2015). The movement also organised gatherings where members would meet in large numbers to pray together, sing together and discuss their interests. It is worth noting that in addition to constructing it, these materials, rituals and practices also serve as ways of expressing collective identity (Poletta & Jasper, 2001).

The collective identity construction, maintenance and mobilisation efforts by the Ombatse proved successful because by 2012 the movement gained high acceptance and popularity among the Eggon people. The Ombatse identity was more or less a symbol of pride among its many supporters, especially among young people from rural areas who formed the bulk of its membership. It availed them a sense of belonging that was defined in opposition to, or as distinct from, others (Ebegbulem, 2011). The result of this success was the movement rapidly expanded and so it created LGA and ward units under the leadership of coordinators. These units were organised as self-help groups with executive committees to manage their affairs. The committee was responsible for enforcing discipline, settling disputes among members, administering oaths of membership and sale of herbs and charms. Members supported each other through subsidised communal labour and the proceeds were kept in their treasury. Members were supported in cash and in kind during ceremonies like child-birth and marriage and during misfortunes. Any member who did an evil act would confess during the weekly meetings of their units in order to avoid being killed by the Ombatse oath. Such erring members were cleansed ritually and asked to pay fines. Revenue was generated in units through membership dues, the taxing of members, administering oaths, sale of herbs, charms and other materials, as well as through fines (S. Egga, personal communication, September 2, 2017). Thus, this shows that the movement was bigger in scope of activities and membership than its militia unit.

The Ombatse and Militancy in Nasarawa State

Collective identity as rightly pointed out by Jasper and McGarry (2015) “stirs people to action by arousing feelings of solidarity with their fellows and by defining moral boundaries against other categories” (p. 1). The popularity of the Ombatse identity enabled the movement to mobilise a large number of supporters within the Eggon ethnic group and, consequently, stirred its members to collective action aimed primarily at protecting and defending the interests of the ethnic group. The result of this collective action was that the movement assumed a militant posture against its perceived opponents and threats. One consequence of such a posture was the heightened ethnic tension, mobilisation and militancy in the Nasarawa State, as other ethnic groups felt threatened by the growing popularity and activities of the movement. Many ethnic

groups in the State mobilised themselves to defend their own interests against real and perceived threat posed from the Ombatse movement. This contributed to the establishment of similar militant movements by most of the major ethnic groups in the State (Enna, 2015). Thus, old grievances and disagreements were revived and given new interpretations by rival ethnic groups and non-violent dispute resolution techniques were no longer effective. The result of this tension was a number of conflicts between the Ombatse and some ethnic groups in Nasarawa State. One of such was the communal clashes between the Ombatse and the Alago ethnic group at Assakio in May, 2012 and at Obi in June 2012. Several violent clashes between the Ombatse and the Fulani occurred in October 2012 (Philip, 2015). In November 2012, the Ombatse was involved in a violent clash with the Migili ethnic group in Agyaragu, near Lafia. Similarly, in January 2013, the Ombatse clashed with the Gwandara in Kwandere (Ishaya, 2014). All these conflicts resulted in the loss of lives, property as well as the displacements of people in the affected areas. Consequently, there began a rise in the stigmatisation of Eggon people by other ethnic groups both within and outside Nasarawa State. In addition, the ensuing conflicts resulted in the expulsion of many Eggon people from places like Agyaragu in Lafia LGA and parts of Obi LGA, irrespective of whether they belonged to Ombatse movement or not.

The response of the Nasarawa State government to the militant posture of the Ombatse had brought it into confrontation with the movement. One major clash between the Ombatse and the State happened at a village called Allogani in Nassarawa Eggon LGA where security agents were sent to movement's gathering to arrest its chairman in November 2012. During this incident, some gun shots were fired by the security agents and this sparked widespread protests and disorderliness in Nassarawa Eggon where the Federal road passing through the area was blocked by rampaging youths (Philip, 2015). However, this only served to embolden the movement and it continued its activities in defiance of the State government. In December 2012, the State government labelled the movement an ethnic militia and proscribed it. This was followed by efforts to enforce the ban on the Ombatse and in May 2013 security agents were sent to Alakyo village to arrest Lega Agu. The security agents were ambushed by members of Ombatse near the village and over 70 of them were killed (Ayuba 2014). This resulted in a massive crackdown on the movement which affected Eggon people in general; this included arrests, incarceration and dismissal of some Eggon security agents and civil servants accused of being members of Ombatse. Consequently, the Ombatse movement began losing its appeal as many Eggon people started dissociating themselves from it.

Decline of the Ombatse Movement

The success of collective identity construction is often accompanied by risks and negative impact both from internal and external factors (Jasper & McGarry, 2015). The case of the Ombatse was not different; the success of its mobilisation activities in Eggonland attracted some risks which contributed towards undermining the movement. As earlier



pointed out, the growth in its membership necessitated the creation of LGA and ward units throughout Eggonland, and this in turn brought with it some problems. It is believed that this growth allowed some unscrupulous elements to gain entry into the movement and even attain positions of leadership. Consequently, some unit coordinators became more focused on personal gains than on upholding the principles of the group. Some were said to be adulterating the herbs and amulets of the group and selling it to unsuspecting members. Some were said to secretly sell these to members of other ethnic groups at exorbitant prices. Fake oaths were said to be administered for profit as well as the practice of forcing people to take oath. The overall impact of these was that the efficacy of these herbs, amulets and oath-taking came under question. The sight of those who took oaths doing these evil acts without any harm coming to them brought doubts about the genuineness of the Ombatse movement (A. Abu, personal communication, September 12, 2017; Ombugadu, 2021).

The popularity of the Ombatse in Eggonland led to the emergence of powerful individuals who ended up competing with each other. The rise of individuals such as Lega Agu (also known as Baba Alakyo) to prominence was solely as a result of becoming the Chief Priest of the movement. However, over time Baba Alakyo became so powerful that his name became almost synonymous with the movement's identity. His popularity eclipsed the identity of other leaders of the group. Thus, competing individual interests and rivalries began undermining the collective interests of the movement and, what Hale (2004) refers to as, common points of reference. Shortly after the movement was proscribed in late 2012 there was a disagreement within its leadership over strategy. Some preferred adopting a low profile while others preferred to maintain a confrontational approach. Consequently, the group broke into two factions and all efforts to reunite them proved abortive (Danladi & Sule, 2019). However, this only served to increase the popularity of Baba Alakyo, so much so that his death in 2014 was interpreted by many as the end of the Ombatse movement (S. Egga, personal communication, September 2, 2017).

The popularity of Ombatse also created tension within the Eggon ethnic group because a good number of people did not identify with the movement. In Eggonland Elders are generally regarded with suspicion as being involved in witchcraft. Consequently, some young people who joined the Ombatse treated the elders with disdain because they believed they now had protection against witchcraft. This resulted in a loss of authority by elders and a significant collapse of the traditional social structures in some communities. Consequently, some of these elders had to either support the group or remain neutral in order to remain relevant in their communities (A. Abu, personal communication, September 12, 2017). Nonetheless, many Eggon people rejected the Ombatse movement in spite of the risk of being labelled as saboteurs and victimised as a result. In addition, many religious leaders of both Christianity and Islam in Eggonland opposed the rise and activities of the movement. Although the return to traditional practices by the Ombatse was able to unite Eggon people from all religions, it did not necessarily require them to abandon their religions. Yet, these

traditional practices were frowned upon by some Christian and Muslim adherents in Eggonland. In addition, the practice of forcing some Eggon people to take the Ombatse oath was viewed as a threat by these religions (Danladi & Sule, 2019). The decline of the movement was steady from 2013 until it eventually ceased to be a significant movement in Eggonland. One of the causes of the decline of movements, as noted by Polletta and Jasper (2001), was when members stop believing that the movement represents them. Indeed, by 2015 a significant proportion of the Eggon people who once believed in the Ombatse movement no longer saw it as representing their interests.

Conclusion

This paper examined the construction and utilisation of collective identity by the Ombatse movement for the mobilisation of support within the Eggon ethnic group and how the resultant support enabled the movement to assume a militant posture in Nasarawa State of Nigeria. The Ombatse identity was built around the Ashim religion and portrayed itself as a revival of ancestral practices aimed at cleansing the Eggon people from moral vices and the resultant misfortunes bedevilling them. This identity was attractive to many Eggon people because it not only converged with their other identities but also promised to rid them of social vices, witchcraft, evil and misfortunes. Rituals like the membership oath-taking, smoking herbs and wearing charms promised protection from evil while also serving to demarcate insiders from outsiders. The Ombatse identity was maintained and expressed through these collective rituals which, in addition, were aimed at both uniting its members and mobilising them for collective action to protect their interests. This was manifested in a sustained militant posture that brought the movement into violent confrontations with numerous opponents in Nasarawa State. This indicates that collective identity was not only a powerful mechanism for the mobilisation for support by the Ombatse movement but also for the deployment of militancy in Nasarawa State. However, the resultant growth, popularity and militant activities of the movement contributed towards its eventual decline.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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Book Review: Comrades Beyond the Cold War: North Korea and the Liberation of Southern Africa¹²

Buyisile Ntaka³

In the introduction of this captivating read the author, Tycho van der Hoog, states that this book explores North Korea's contribution to the liberation of Southern Africa and analyses how African states have reciprocated this historical assistance in the present day. In particular, it investigates how political elites in Southern Africa benefited from North Korean support between 1960 and 2020. He argues that "the end of the Cold War did not terminate the fraternal ties between both parties but merely changed the nature of the African–North Korean alliance. Hence, African and North Korean elites remain comrades beyond the Cold War".⁴ The book is divided into three parts. The first two examine the 'revolutionary alliance' between African states and North Korea, which emerged from North Korea's diplomatic and military support for African liberation movements, support that Julius Nyerere identified as a foundation of independence for these movements. The third part reflects on how the presence of North Korean monuments in Africa signifies the continuing relevance of African–North Korean relations. The book is based on van der Hoog's PhD dissertation, and he notes that it is "consciously centered around African agency",⁵ something which tends to be overlooked in International Relations.

Chapter 1 highlights a crucial dimension of the struggle for freedom, namely solidarity. It reflects on the various liberation movements in Southern Africa: SWAPO,⁶ the ANC,⁷ ZANU,⁸ and FRELIMO,⁹ and introduces Tanzania as a central actor in the region's liberation narrative. As one of the Frontline African states that formed an alliance during the Cold War to oppose South African apartheid, Tanzania became a refuge for exiled African liberation fighters who established headquarters and training camps in the capital, Dar es Salaam. The city also functioned as a vital gateway linking African liberation movements to the wider international community. As van der Hoog says, "Tanzania was one of the principal stages for the politics of African solidarity, and therefore a strategic place for North Korean investment".¹⁰ The diplomacy of African

¹ DOI: 10.12700/jceas.2026.6.2.470

² Tycho van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the Cold War: North Korea and the Liberation of Southern Africa*. Hurst & Company, 2025, 336 pp., ISBN: 9781805262787, \$ 33,68.

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⁴ Tycho van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the Cold War: North Korea and the Liberation of Southern Africa*. Hurst & Company, 2025, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶ South West Africa People's Organisation

⁷ African National Congress

⁸ Zimbabwe African National Union

⁹ Frente de Libertação Moçambique

¹⁰ Tycho van der Hoog, *Comrades Beyond the Cold War: North Korea and the Liberation of Southern Africa*.



liberation movements was ‘crucial’ to sustaining the flows of weapons, material aid, and humanitarian support on which their survival depended. To a large extent, these diplomatic initiatives were launched from Tanzania and other Frontline States. The chapter also shows that African liberation movements increasingly turned to Asian partners as a result of inadequate funding from within Africa and limited support from Western countries. In this context, assistance from states such as North Korea provided a vital lifeline to liberation movements during periods of need.

Chapter 2 examines how both South Korea and North Korea competed for African support in the diplomatic arena, particularly in relation to recognition at the United Nations. It highlights the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization (AAPSO), which was committed to non-aligned solidarity and decolonization, and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), an outcome of the Bandung Conference that laid the foundations for cooperation across the Global South, as important new channels of engagement between African states and the Korean peninsula. Through these platforms, North Korea became acquainted with Southern African liberation movements. The chapter shows that the Koreas themselves initiated African-Korean relations, with North Korea relying primarily on cultural diplomacy and South Korea on trade diplomacy. Although both states maintained diplomatic ties with African countries, African governments tended to favour North Korea because of its perceived global independence. In addition, North Korea’s membership in the NAM appealed to African states seeking to build international relationships despite Western pressure. The NAM also provided a space for North Korea and African states to experiment with cooperation across different policy areas, thereby strengthening mutual trust. Although North Korea’s influence within the NAM proved short-lived, its early successes enabled it to build significant political capital among African member states.

Chapter 3 introduces the reader to the mechanisms through which African–North Korean relations were cultivated. It assesses North Korea’s invitation diplomacy in the Southern African context and explores the significance of Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, as a key meeting place. As the chapter notes, “personal invitations to Pyongyang were a powerful tool in the goodwill campaign that North Korea utilised to impress African countries”.¹¹ In the first two decades following the Korean War, North Korea’s economy outperformed that of South Korea, and Pyongyang showcased impressive post-war reconstruction alongside the regime’s Juche ideals (translated as ‘self-reliance’, premised on the principle that ‘man is the master of all things’). The city’s architecture and its people projected a promise of possibility to oppressed or newly liberated populations across the globe. The chapter further observes that “the entire first generation of Southern African presidents visited Pyongyang and maintained friendly, personal ties to the Kim regime throughout their tenure in government”.¹² African delegates were received with the highest honours, and leaders of liberation movements

Hurst & Company, 2025, 27.

¹¹ Ibid., 57.

¹² Ibid., 60.

were welcomed as statesmen-in-waiting at a time when much of the Western world regarded them with suspicion. These bilateral engagements created fertile ground for North Korea to cultivate strong personal relationships with African leaders. Ultimately, invitation diplomacy contributed to deeper diplomatic ties, expanded military cooperation, and the sale of North Korean monuments.

Chapter 4 unpacks Juche thought which, according to van der Hoog, replaced Marxism–Leninism as North Korea’s official ideology in 1970, signalling political independence from its two principal communist sponsors, China and Russia. This ideological shift made North Korea more attractive to non-aligned African states and gave it a diplomatic advantage over South Korea. Juche resonated strongly with indigenous African development philosophies, including Kenneth Kaunda’s humanism, Kwame Nkrumah’s consciencism, Julius Nyerere’s Ujamaa, and Seretse Khama’s *boipelego* principle. As the chapter explains, “African desires for autonomy, anti-imperialism and postcolonial development were echoed in Juche thought, which hinted at socialist principles and underlined the importance of self-determination”.¹³ It further argues that “Juche was thus instrumental in creating a shared ideological framework that brought the distant political struggles of African liberation movements and North Korea closer together. This, in turn, allowed the development of practical connections that benefited all sides”.¹⁴

Chapter 5 explores why African states were particularly receptive to North Korea’s development ideas. As van der Hoog notes, “there were two main reasons for Africa’s interest in North Korean development aid: its miraculous post-war reconstruction and its emphasis on independence from external actors, especially from major powers”.¹⁵ For North Korea, development assistance formed a central component of its foreign policy in Africa, especially in the agricultural sector. The chapter examines Tanzania and Ghana as key sites of African–North Korean agricultural cooperation. Both countries served as strategic hubs for liberation movements and held strong ideological significance, given the influence of Julius Nyerere and Kwame Nkrumah as leading thinkers on African decolonisation. Although these initiatives were framed as South–South cooperation, they achieved limited success, largely because decision-making was imposed from Pyongyang with little regard for local conditions and dynamics.

Turning to the second part of the book, Chapter 6 focuses on the Southern African battlefield, unpacking the shift in African political thought that led anticolonial leaders to take up arms. It introduces the various wars fought across Southern Africa from the 1960s to the 1990s and highlights the central challenge faced by liberation movements, the shortage of weapons, to which the Communist bloc became a crucial source of support for African liberation. As the demand for weapons intensified, North Korea emerges as a key actor in Chapter 7. van der Hoog notes that the Korean War was the first major military conflict of the Cold War and that its effects were felt globally. He

¹³ Ibid., 72.

¹⁴ Ibid., 82.

¹⁵ Ibid., 86.



argues that the war was instrumental in establishing the early networks between Pyongyang and African states. While some African countries fought on behalf of South Korea, others drew inspiration from North Korea's wartime legacy. As alluded to earlier in the review, North Korea's anti-colonial outlook (shaped by its struggle against Japanese colonisation) and its post-war reconstruction efforts resonated strongly with African states. Beyond rhetorical support, North Korea actively assisted liberation movements by providing arms. In this sense, both North Korea and African liberation movements perceived themselves as fellow freedom fighters.

Chapters 8, 9 and 10 provide insight into the dynamics of African–North Korean relations by examining the various military programmes and training initiatives that North Korea offered to the armed wings of liberation movements. These engagements initially took place in sites of exile across the African continent. With North Korean assistance, African liberation forces were able to defeat white settler regimes and colonial governments. North Korea continued to play a significant role in the post-independence period, as former revolutionaries assumed positions of power, by offering internal regime support to African states. In the final decade of the Cold War, the provision of presidential security emerged as a central theme in African–North Korean relations. Despite United Nations sanctions imposed in the 2000s, which led to North Korea's international isolation, African–North Korean relations have persisted. Countries such as Angola and Namibia, for example, received a North Korean delegation that travelled to Africa in 2008 in an effort to expand economic and trade cooperation and to break Pyongyang's diplomatic isolation. In this way, North Korea has managed to endure despite significant internal and external pressures. van der Hoog nevertheless observes that “the modus operandi of many North Korean operatives appears to be opportunistic trade that exploits historic relationships, maintenance dependency and weak enforcement”.¹⁶

The third and final part of the book, set largely in the twenty-first century, reflects on this earlier period. North Korean memorials across Africa are a direct legacy of the diplomatic ties forged between North Korean and African leaders and frequently commemorate the struggles for independence. To understand the correlation between North Korean memorials and African memorials, Chapter 11 offers an example of the Independence Memorial in Namibia which according to van der Hoog “has a similar function as the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum in Pyongyang, which narrates North Korea's war experience through the heritage of anticolonial struggle. The adoption of North Korea's heritage model occurs across Southern Africa”.¹⁷ Consequently, liberation governments emerge as the sole actors in the revolutionary struggle, thereby marginalising all other participants. As a result, the party assumes unquestioned dominance. How this has shaped nation states in Africa is explained in great detail in Chapters 12, 13, 14 and 15, with an emphasis on post-liberation states leaning into a nationalist heritage, seen through the erecting of nationalist monuments

¹⁶ Ibid., 173.

¹⁷ Ibid., 193–194.

such as the African Renaissance Monument in Senegal—the construction of which was delayed at some point because the faces looked too Korean (oddly). Notwithstanding, van der Hoog notes that “the liberation movements that fought for democracy have been transformed into liberation governments that are guided by a desire for political survival and display anti-democratic behaviour”.¹⁸

The conclusion reflects on the effect of North-Korea on the authoritarian tendencies of political culture in Southern Africa. van der Hoog notes that “a struggle for liberal ideals does not always result in a liberal outcome. African nationalists searched for freedom and eventually found power”.¹⁹ According to van der Hoog, African liberation governments have struggled to move beyond the militarised mindsets formed during exile and continue to interpret contemporary politics through a liberation lens. By invoking the past to legitimise their authority, they promote the notion of a continuous struggle extending into the twenty-first century. In their pursuit of prolonged rule, these governments found an unexpected source of inspiration in North Korea, a hereditary/dynastic state that has persisted post the Cold War. Focusing on ‘African agency’ (hinted to earlier in this review) reveals that liberation governments strategically employed North Korea’s diplomatic cooperation, military assistance, and nationalist heritage to ultimately advance their own party interests rather than those of the state as a whole.

As someone previously unfamiliar with North Korea’s role in the liberation movements of Southern Africa, I found this book to be an eye-opener. As van der Hoog emphasises, African–North Korean relations cannot be understood solely through a Cold War lens but instead extend well beyond it. North Korea has had a profound influence on the post-colonial trajectories of Southern African states, while also benefiting from trade relations at a time when it remains largely isolated within the global system. I agree with van der Hoog’s assertion that ‘Southern Africa is governed by the past’, with political elites clinging to liberation histories to maintain their hold on power, although the tide may be turning in countries such as South Africa, where marginalised communities are increasingly recognising that history alone cannot sustain them. Using the past to rule has allowed contemporary politics to be framed through ‘revolutionary rhetoric’, as van der Hoog notes, usually at the expense of democratic practice. This is not unique to Southern Africa though; this pattern is evident across much of the continent where liberation movements have transitioned into governing parties, often paving the way for the emergence of ‘strong man’ leaders that refuse to leave their seats of power.

Overall, this first of its kind book offers comprehensive and thoughtful insights into African–North Korean relations. I highly recommend it to those interested in African politics and history, Cold War and post–Cold War international relations and North Korea’s foreign policy.

¹⁸ Ibid., 237.

¹⁹ Ibid., 239.

Book Review: China's Footprint in East Africa – Pessimism versus Optimism¹²

Marcell Pintér³

Written by Bob Wekesa and published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2023 as part of the Palgrave Series in Asia and Pacific Studies, *China's Footprint in East Africa – Pessimism versus Optimism* tackles how China's growing presence is perceived within East African Community (EAC) countries. In this book, the author endeavours to employ a standard academic method as well as what he calls “informal” approach in which he draws on his own experiences, conversations, and observations regarding the subject matter. The book intends to explore the various narratives and frameworks that shape the Sino-African relations on the ground. This analysis focuses on the six core member states of the EAC – namely Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda.

In the book, Wekesa distinguishes three “perceptual categories” used to view China's footprint on the continent:

- “Optimism” views China as a benevolent partner and a worthwhile development model. The usual tropes characteristic of optimism includes the benign “win-win” nature of cooperation, China's policy of non-interference in domestic affairs, and the speed and efficiency with which Chinese projects are delivered. For many African leaders, China offers an alternative to the Western way of cooperation and investment without imposed political conditions. Wekesa likens this perspective to the liberal school of thought in international relations.
- “Pessimism”, as Wekesa explains, is a more “anti-China” perspective often fuelled by Western narratives as well as the everyday concerns among the population. This view characterises China as a neo-colonial force and a hegemon. The themes of pessimism include the debt-trap diplomacy, Chinese cheap goods flooding the market, poor labour standards, environmental degradation, and that China's underlying intent is the general exploitation of the continent for its resources. Wekesa argues that these views are largely fuelled by myths and rumours, and that it best aligns with realist thought.
- Lastly, “pragmatism” is an in-between position and views the Sino-EAC relationship as a glass half-full and half-empty, acknowledging elements from both aforementioned sides. Pragmatism, the author argues, recognises the tangible benefits of Chinese investment – such as the Standard Gauge Railway

¹ DOI: 10.12700/jceas.2026.6.2.527

² Wekesa, Bob, *China's Footprint in East Africa – Pessimism versus Optimism*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. ISBN: 978-9819952670. pp. 357. \$ 134,83.

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(SGR) in Kenya –, while also being critical of other issues, such as the unequal trade balance. Pragmatism emphasises African agency and interests first and foremost, without necessarily falling into one camp or the other.

Wekesa then explains how history is utilised to serve modern diplomatic ends. Discourse regarding China often mentions first and foremost Zheng He's voyages in the 15th century to the East African coast as a way to give legitimacy to China's current presence and frame it as a return to an ancient, peaceful friendship rather than a newer, imperialist endeavour.

The People's Republic of China, throughout the latter half of the 20th century, sought to rally African countries behind its ideological banner, leveraging anti-Western and anti-colonial views. Wekesa describes this as the forerunner of the anti-global-north sentiment among the countries of the global south today. The author argues that the PRC's early dealings with, among others, EAC countries stemmed from pragmatism and gradually gave way to optimism. However, China also had to realise that it needed a more pragmatic approach than ideology.

In the case of Tanzania, China has historically maintained very close and rather optimistic relations, largely stemming from ideological proximity, albeit it suffers pessimistic setbacks at times which China has been keen to mend. An advantage for Tanzania is the fact that the Chinese ambassador to the EAC doubles as the ambassador to Tanzania, thus, Wekesa argues, the two countries' relations can affect the region and beyond as well.

As for Kenya, relations were not always fraternal and turned very pessimistic following the country's independence as Kenya at that time was looking Westward rather than to the East. However, in the last decade, Sino-Kenyan relations started to ameliorate and have since become a rather close ally to China with Nairobi becoming a regional hub for Chinese firms.

While Tanzania swung East and Kenya swung West during the Cold War, Uganda sat somewhere in-between, occupying a fully pragmatist position, argues Wekesa. Cooperation started to pick up, and investment went on to overtake that of the UK by the early 2010's.

Burundi started out in a similarly positive way like Tanzania; however, it quickly became volatile between regimes. took a turn for the worse like in Kenya's case and relations would cease altogether at one point. By the turn of the millennium, however, Sino-Burundi relations stabilised and now the country is largely reliant on China in its struggle against poverty.

Lastly, Rwanda, as the author explains, had for a decade after its independence been only beholden to the US both economically and politically, with marginally no room to manoeuvre left for Beijing in the country. For this reason, the PRC supported its Tutsi minority with weapons against the Hutu-dominated government during the Cold War. For these reasons, the outlook remained pessimistic towards China, which over the years have turned to pragmatism.



As Wekesa points out, before the EAC solidified, China was relying on bilateral agreements for which multilateral avenues were only auxiliary. This changed in 2011, after which Sino-East African investments became also regional. As a whole, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) serves as the flagship for Chinese expansion into the EAC, since these countries seek funding for large-scale projects that might otherwise be neglected by Western investment.

The book goes on to detail how infrastructure became the most visible element of China's footprint in East Africa. China has committed to building many infrastructure projects in the EAC, including motorways like the various projects spanning more than a thousand kilometres in Tanzania alone, railways like the Tanzania Zambia Railway or the Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya. These projects worked towards fostering optimism, however, cases like the Bagamoyo Port project in Tanzania, the largest Chinese port project in East Africa that fell through, or the failed new airport building project in Nairobi that was lost to a massive corruption scandal, only increased pessimism towards China.

As Wekesa goes on to explain, what best describes Sino-East African relations in terms of investment is ambivalence – for example, in a 2012 street protest against Chinese traders in Nairobi, the protesting locals still viewed infrastructure projects from China as positive. Indeed, while China is sometimes blamed for outbidding local firms, indigenous contractors are observed to often cut corners and leave projects incomplete, which as a byproduct has contributed to a more optimistic outlook on Chinese projects.

In terms of natural resources, the author argues that the image is even more complex, as while Chinese projects have enabled resource extraction, it has also sparked fears of short-term exploitation not dissimilar to the colonial era. As Wekesa points out, East Africa, save for Tanzania, is not necessarily known for its rich mineral deposits like other regions of Africa, China nevertheless is increasingly present in the region, securing deals by playing the long game. Since the region's natural resource deposits have only recently started to be discovered, belatedly compared others, there is a lot of opportunity for the EAC to take advantage of. Tanzania, for example, sits on massive natural gas reserves which could solve part of its energy needs, however, it requires further investment.

As for popular perception, the image of the East Asian nation in the heads of East Africans is difficult to gauge due to mixed signals coming from Beijing, as Wekesa explains China constantly paints itself as a still developing country that, at the same time, also wants to appear superior and able to help other developing countries. The author states that because of this confusing situation, optimist rhetoric from Beijing will always be met with its opposite, as will the pessimism being sown by Western geopolitical competitors, rendering both to be unable to establish primacy. As Wekesa points out, investment from China increases optimism, but increasing imports of low-quality products decrease it, furthermore, if the matters of democracy and human rights are brought up, locals tend to favour the West and oppose China.

In shaping these perceptions, media and communications also play an important role. Wekesa analyses how Chinese state media, specifically CGTN and Xinhua News Agency,

attempt to sway opinions to counter Western pessimism. Conversely, soft power tools like Confucius Institutes are often met with suspicion over possible cultural imperialism yet still deemed essential for business and cultural exchange.

Lastly, the author presents the cultural aspects through a trove of empirical examples. As he explains, East African countries do not have meaningful programmes for spreading their culture in China and rely solely on the latter's unilateral agenda setting to bridge gaps between cultures. This comes as a pragmatic solution but forces East Africa into a passive role at the same time, leading to the aforementioned claims of China's cultural imperialism.

Wekesa finally concludes that China's footprint in East Africa is now a permanent reality. He argues that the perception about China is inextricably mixed between optimism, pessimism and pragmatism, and trying to view it through an absolute dichotomy is unhelpful. Instead, he continues, the future of Sino–East-African relations depend on the ability of local leaders and citizens to exercise pragmatic agency, leveraging Chinese interests to achieve sustainable development while redressing significant trade imbalances.

In conclusion, Bob Wekesa's *China's Footprint in East Africa – Pessimism versus Optimism* is a timely and nuanced contribution to understanding Chinese and East-African relations and realities. In contrast to popular interpretations of the geopolitical struggle for Africa, the author's analysis establishes a much more functional framework for the subject matter. This makes the book an essential read for students and scholars of international relations, journalists, and policymakers to better understand the competing perceptual frameworks that beset the China-East Africa debate. It rightfully differentiates between and categorises attitudes relating to China on multiple levels. The interdisciplinary method of combining facts with empirical data and personal experiences allows a much-appreciated holistic approach to understanding the finer details of the subject matter.

However, the book does suffer from redundant wordage and editorialising, occasional loss of scope, and overall verbosity. One further downside is the deliberate choice to exclude charts and infographics. Wekesa justifies this by saying that Chinese data is often opaque and disputable. Instead, he argues that the perception of economic engagement is often more politically potent than the exact monetary figures themselves. This, however, forgoes some extra clarity and grounding to the topics discussed. Despite this, it is still an important collection of what is to know about the East African countries' relationship with a China.



Book Review: Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Youth Entrepreneurship: Recentring the Voices of Marginalized Communities in Africa¹²

Tímea Hillender³

“Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Youth Entrepreneurship: Recentring the Voices of Marginalized Communities in Africa” is a thought-provoking and timely contribution to the ongoing debate on how Africa can address the persistent challenge of youth unemployment. Edited by Samuel Ojo Oloruntoba, Inocent Moyo, and Lethiwe Zondo, and published open access by Bloomsbury Academic in 2025 as an outcome of the African Indigenous Knowledge Research Network (AIKRN) in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation, the volume brings together scholars from East, West, and Southern Africa to explore how Indigenous knowledge systems (IKSs) can be placed at the centre of entrepreneurship and employment policy. What distinguishes this book is its insistence on listening to the voices of Indigenous youth, elders, and women themselves, rather than treating marginalized communities as passive objects of policy design.

The volume is structured into two parts. The first part lays the theoretical and methodological foundations of the book, engaging with the long-standing debates on the decolonization of knowledge and the recentring of Afrocentric approaches to research. The second part presents a rich collection of case studies from across the continent, examining how Indigenous communities such as the Maasai, Batwa, Banyankole, Ijaw, and Ogoni navigate questions of governance, natural resource access, and entrepreneurship in their own specific contexts.

The opening chapter, written by Samuel Ojo Oloruntoba, sets the tone for the entire volume by arguing that the silencing of African knowledge systems was one of the most damaging legacies of colonialism. Drawing on the concept of “epistemicide”, the author demonstrates how postcolonial states in Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa have continued to design employment and entrepreneurship policies according to Eurocentric models, largely ignoring the rich entrepreneurial traditions that existed in Africa long before colonial intrusion. The chapter convincingly shows that policies imposed from above, without engaging the Indigenous youth, elders, and women who hold the

¹ DOI: 10.12700/jceas.2026.6.2.541

² Oloruntoba, Samuel Ojo, Inocent Moyo, and Lethiwe Zondo, eds. *Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Youth Entrepreneurship: Recentring the Voices of Marginalized Communities in Africa*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025. ISBN: 978-1666952049. Open access under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. \$37,95 (Paperback).

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relevant knowledge, have repeatedly failed to reduce unemployment among marginalized groups such as the Maasai and the Ogiek.

In the second chapter, Endurance Uzobo turns to methodology, advocating for an Afrocentric approach to researching Indigenous youth. The chapter offers a useful overview of ethnographic techniques – life histories, key cultural consultants, participant observation, genealogical methods, and various forms of qualitative analysis such as narrative, discourse, and thematic analysis – and explains why these tools are particularly well suited to capturing the lived realities of African Indigenous communities. The third chapter, by Yakubu Abubakar, builds on this methodological discussion by making the case for participatory research as a vehicle for co-producing knowledge with Indigenous communities, rather than merely extracting data from them.

The second part of the book opens with Ambrose T. Kessy's analysis of governance institutions among the Maasai communities of Arusha, Tanzania. The chapter traces the historical marginalization of the Maasai, from the colonial-era Masai Development Plan to contemporary conflicts over conservation areas such as Loliondo and Ngorongoro and argues that any meaningful entrepreneurship policy must engage with Maasai governance structures rather than bypass them. In the following chapter, John Mary Kanyamurwa examines the Batwa of south-western Uganda, showing through eleven key informant interviews and focus group discussions how restrictive funding guidelines and the loss of access to the Bwindi and Mgahinga forests have severely limited Batwa youth entrepreneurship, despite the efforts of civil society organizations on the ground.

A particularly engaging chapter is the gendered assessment of milk safety practices among smallholder Banyankole farmers in Kiruhura District, Uganda, by Judith Irene Nagasha and colleagues. Based on a survey of over three hundred households, the authors document in fascinating detail the Indigenous utensils and techniques – such as the ekishabo churning gourd and the use of smoking plants like *Terminalia brownii* and *Hyparrhenia rufa* – that are still used to preserve and process milk. The chapter shows that while women bear the heaviest burden in milk handling and processing, cultural taboos continue to exclude them from the actual milking of cattle, a finding that raises important questions about how IKSs intersect with gender inequality.

Lethiwe Zondo, Khayelihle Sibisia, and Wandile Zondo contribute a powerful chapter on the iNanda Tribal Land surrounding the iNanda Dam in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Combining African philosophical frameworks with an analysis of the devastating April 2022 floods, the authors demonstrate how the construction of large dams disrupted Indigenous early warning systems and destroyed youth-owned enterprises, while upstream pollution from affluent communities continues to threaten the livelihoods of Indigenous youth downstream. The chapter is a sobering reminder that environmental governance and entrepreneurship promotion cannot be separated from questions of historical dispossession and ongoing structural inequality.

Samantha Williams then explores the cultural and knowledge practices embedded in small-scale fisheries in the Ebenhaeser community on South Africa's Olifants River. Through focus group discussions and household surveys, the chapter illustrates how



fishing represents far more than an economic activity for this community – it is a source of identity, belonging, and intergenerational knowledge transfer, even as fishers continue to be marginalized within formal fisheries governance structures.

The remaining chapters extend the discussion to Indigenous communities and access to natural resources more broadly, and to youth perspectives on entrepreneurship and employment among the Ijaw and Ogoni peoples of the Niger Delta in Nigeria. These chapters collectively reinforce one of the book's central arguments: that the chronic failure of government programs to reduce unemployment in marginalized communities stems directly from the exclusion of the voices and knowledge of the very people these programs claim to serve.

What makes this volume particularly valuable is its refusal to romanticize Indigenous knowledge as an automatic solution. Several chapters candidly discuss the tensions and contradictions involved – for instance, the gendered burdens placed on women in milk production, or the cultural taboos that restrict certain economic activities. At the same time, the book makes a compelling case that any sustainable approach to youth entrepreneurship in Africa must build on, rather than override, the knowledge systems that communities have relied upon for generations.

In conclusion, this is a richly documented and important contribution to the literature on African development, entrepreneurship, and decolonization. By bringing together theoretical reflection and grounded case studies from East, West, and Southern Africa, the editors have produced a volume that genuinely succeeds in recentring the voices of marginalized communities. I highly recommend it to researchers, policymakers, and practitioners working on youth employment, Indigenous rights, and sustainable development in Africa.

Book Review: Jan Smuts's Boys: The Wartime Experiences of the Men of the 2nd South African Infantry Division, 1940-1945¹²

Zsolt Szabó³

When I came across Dr. Scherman's book, I had already finished my PhD-studies at Eszterházy Károly Catholic University in Eger, Hungary. I was learning history as a major at that time in the Doctoral School of History. I remember that in one of the courses, we were talking about narration and oral history. That is where I first learned about the new methods in historical thinking and research which are in short called New World History. In contrast to the previous historical research, when the academics examined the life of a leader, top politician, war heroes, the events of a battle and the like, in this new school of historical thought, the direct primary sources of simple, ordinary participants of the wartime experiences were interpreted and thus a totally new perspective of historical view was invented. I was delighted to see in the Prologue of the work that the author used this kind of method to describe the story and the wartime events of the 2nd South African Infantry Division (from now on 2nd S.A. Inf. Div.) in the Second World War (xii-xiii.), because this way the modern historical thinking was used and thus the new patterns of historic research was given a chance. In my opinion, if these techniques got more space in scientific research and in the historian's work, academic thinking in this field would improve by far. However, I took the book into my hand with true pleasure and read it that way. I was not disappointed.

The first chapter of the work concerns the preliminary preparations of the 2nd S.A. Inf. Div.. After describing how the South African army got into the fight after the war declaration of Mussolini against France and Great Britain on 10 June 1940, it becomes obvious that the country had no chance but to participate in the upcoming long war. As the person responsible for the leadership of the 2nd S.A. Inf. Div. (Colonel I.P. de Williers) is revealed, we get to know that the army was assembled and started to train in areas that would resemble the possible target area where they would be deployed. The 2nd S. A. Inf. Div. had two sessions of training: one in Transvaal and the other later, in Western Transvaal, the town of Mafeking. In these rounds of fight practice, the leaders of the Division sought to get the soldiers used to the circumstances that awaited them at the scene of the future battles. Since the zone where they were going was

¹ DOI: 10.12700/jceeas.2026.6.2.565

² Scherman, Jean-Pierré, *Jan Smuts's Boys: The Wartime Experiences of the Men of the 2nd South African Infantry Division, 1940-1945*. Stellenbosch, South Africa, Sun Press, 2025, 284. pp., ISBN: 978-0-6398893-8-2. \$ 28.87(paperback).

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approximately in Egypt or somewhere near that country, they started training for desert warfare and maneuver (22.). As we get to know, finally 22851 men were to be deployed in Egypt soon.

Following the timeline, the second chapter focuses on the habituation of the desert environment in Egypt and the training and preliminary measures taken by the Divisions of the South African contingent. Along the examination of other Divisions, 2nd S.A. Inf. Div. is also described. According to the book, the South African soldiers arrived at the scene after one year of thorough practice, and they were prepared to take part in the war preparations among the Saharan desert terrain. The southerners weren't used to the new culture and the people in the North African country; thus, they used slurs on them like 'Gyppos'. Not long after, the 2nd S.A. Inf. Div. was ready to take part in the desert exercises: they learnt gun maintenance in the sandy area, direction by the sun, desert warfare and so on (36.). We also learn that along the training and heavy practices in the desert, the soldiers had some time for relieving themselves: they could go on vacation for a short time. They used their time well and went to Cairo and Alexandria to see the Sphinx and the pyramids and other monuments as well.

After this, the third chapter discusses the first wartime experiences of the 2nd S.A. Inf. Div. at the Egyptian-Libyan frontier. By December 1941, the Allied forces – which the South African Divisions joined – entered Tobruk, a Libyan town, and took possession of it. However, with the advent of the Allied forces, some coastal towns in Libya were still on the hands of the Axis forces. Most of this chapter concerns the Battle of Bardia, a small garrison, in which the 2nd S.A. Inf. Div. took part. Along with the description of the battle, we learn the heroism of the South African soldiers, and by getting to know their stories from their diaries, accounts and so on, we get to know their real wartime experience which provide us with valuable historic material and overview on the battle events. This is a turning point in the book: the account of soldiers from primary sources. I can't emphasize enough the relevance of this material, as it provides the readers with rare insight into the events of the war and the life of the soldiers within. After the Night Assault, on 02 January 1942, the Axis forces and their leader, Arthur Schmitt surrendered (69.). The problem was nevertheless that the "Desert Fox" (Erwin Rommel) set eyes on Tobruk as well...

The fourth chapter goes on to narrate the events of the Battle for Gazala, a fortification near Tobruk and with the Battle for Tobruk itself. By 28 March 1942, the 2nd S.A. Inf. Div. entered Tobruk and took their positions inside the fortification. The Germans and Italians attacked on 26 May 1942, via the Unternehmen Venezia (Operation Venice). This campaign was planned by the Axis forces to capture Tobruk, which was a vital point for Rommel as well (72.). The first attacks of the German and Italian forces were successful; they broke forth between the Allied soldiers and artillery deployed there. After severe battle, and along an attempt of counterattack from the South Africans, the Axis forces were unstoppable, and soon, by 21 June 1942 the attacks were so heavy from them that the Allied soldiers had no other choice, but to surrender. The battle was fierce and the South African soldiers took part in it with furious anger

and heroness but at the end, their efforts were vain because the German and Italian tank forces were so strong that their guns and artillery was unable to stop them. This way, the Axis forces could enter the fortification of Tobruk and severe consequences followed. The wartime experiences of ordinary soldiers are vividly described in their diaries and letters included as citations in the book, and this gives a lively picture of the soldiers' experiences during the fight. I can only praise the thorough use of primary sources in the book again.

The fifth chapter tells us about the events after the Battle of Tobruk. Firstly, the soldiers in the 2nd S.A. Inf. Div. didn't know what will happen. They had no news of the events around them. Finally, when they heard the situation, all of them did what they could do: they set their weapons on fire and waited. Not long after, the enemy arrived and took them as Prisoners of War (POWs from now on). They were transferred to the Italians, who started to organize them. As we got to learn, they didn't like them very much, as they couldn't systemize the prison camps well, and the circumstances were dire. Lot of the soldiers tried to escape from the captivity, which was not easy given the circumstances (110.). Here as well, the book uses primary sources of the soldiers to describe their lively stories about how they managed to escape from their captors. Finally, we learn that the Italians put them on ships and sailed them to Europe (Italy) to POW camps.

The next chapter, the sixth describes the voyages to Italy by ship to Brindisi and Naples. The soldiers were crammed in small hulls inside these ships: they had no air; their places were inconvenient. They started to riot, in consequence of which the Italians tried to alleviate their difficulties by letting them on the deck of the ships. When they arrived at the prison camps, they were tired and weary. Their "accommodation" was not the most comfortable place ever seen. We got to know that there were places where even water was not eligible and they suffered from malnutrition and illnesses. When the winter came, some of them had to be moved. After some time, thanks to the Geneva Convention of 1929, they were allowed to do work on the nearby farms and factories, which they gladly accepted (141.). The 2nd S.A. Inf. Div. became accustomed with this situation, and sooner or later they managed to cope with the circumstances. This chapter also contains various interpretations and descriptions of the events that happened to the soldiers from firsthand, thus adding to the book's already refreshing nature. Little did these soldiers know that their situation is about to change hugely with the Italian Armistice.

The following (seventh) chapter depicts the repatriation of the soldiers from Italy, at least the ones who could avoid recapture. As we come to know, on 25 July 1943 Benito Mussolini was relieved of duty by the Italian king, and thus the Italian prisons started to open, since the guards just simply walked away. The South African POWs in Italy tried to go either to the Apennines, or south to Sicily to board a ship. As the Germans in reaction to the Armistice marched in the country and tried to collect the prisoners (155.), the remaining soldiers of the 2nd S.A. Inf. Div. tried to evade these patrols and get successfully back home. With the leadership of Prime Minister J. C. (Jan) Smuts – that is

why these soldiers are called “Jan Smuts’s Boys” by the book in the title – the South African government tried everything to free these POWs now wandering in the area. Thus, first they arranged for Reception Camps in Italy and England and then took the prisoners after that to Egypt to Transit Camps. The lucky ones arrived at this time in a safe place and could start to relieve themselves a little bit.

The situation of the escapees is the theme of the eighth chapter, in which we get to know the story of those who escaped in Italy and got to safe zone. It is concluded, that in that time, not a lot of soldiers from the 2nd S.A. Inf. Div. did escape successfully. Their fate was harsh, let alone in the lands of Italy and marching several hundred kms to find a safe space for themselves and to escape the Germans who searched for them in a vengeful manner. Some of them went to the North: from there, they could reach somewhat easily Switzerland, and from there, their fate would be relieved. Some went to south, the reach Africa through Sicily. Some of them joined partisan groups, with whom they even fought against the enemy as well. These soldiers hid in mountains (189.). However, some prisoners were not that lucky: the German platoons caught them and carried them to Germany via rail. This made their escape even more difficult. The only way that they could evade the German captivity was to jump off the trains, which was not the safest way for getting away. However, as they had no other choice, some of them really tried this way of escape.

In the ninth chapter we find the narrative on the liberation of POWs from nazi Germany. There were two ways a POW could be liberated from the even harsher circumstances in the heart of the Third Reich. First one was by the Soviets who were marching on the enemy at a great pace. By 17 January 1945, they entered Warsaw and later they went to Berlin as well. The POW camps they found during their march were liberated, and a part of the prisoners thus were able to go to their homeland via Odessa by ship. The other way was to be liberated by the Westerners who came from West to the East to the Rhine River. They chose to repatriate the POWs they found. The Germans – as they heard that the enemy was closing in – made the remaining prisoners to go on a Long March: they just made them walk towards the lines of the Allied forces, where they found them and helped them. Their circumstances and living conditions were devastatingly dire: they didn’t have food; they suffered from malnutrition and several of them were injured and dying (217.). However, on 08 May 1945 nazi Germany surrendered and this made all the POWs to be freed instantly. This gave a severe organizational difficulty: finally, most of the prisoners from the 2nd S.A. Inf. Div. were transported to Brighton, where after they were treated and fed, they went back to their homelands by airplanes or ships.

The last, tenth chapter is about the fate of the returning soldiers from the 2nd S.A. Inf. Div. In this chapter as well, there are lively stories told about the return of the POWs to South Africa, which also contributes to the great number of primary sources of the book. As we get to know, by June 1945, a great amount of South African troops arrived at their homeland, where their relatives and friends were eagerly waiting for them. They couldn’t hear direct data on the return of their loved ones, so they were waiting in the

dark. Soon, as the airplanes arrived, and the soldiers came home to their hometowns by train arranged for them, their loved ones hugged them and welcomed them listening to the wonderful or dreadful stories they had for them to tell. However, not all the soldiers hurried back home: some of them took sightseeing tours or enjoyed the countryside in England. After some time, nevertheless, they as well returned to their home via ships. The final 1200 soldiers left Britain on 26 August 1945, and they were cheerfully welcomed by their relatives as well in their hometowns (249).

As we arrive at the Epilogue of the work, it is perhaps of interest to summarize the main aspects of the book. As we discussed, the work is using the New World History methods, and by this, contributes to the historical profoundness and scientific nature of the text. The grassroot historical approach was used then, which concerns the life of the ordinary soldiers taking part in the battles and fighting in north Africa. The style of the book is eloquent, and the number of primary sources is astonishing. What strikes me really in the Epilogue, is that the author emphasizes that this was a description of a division which lost the city of Tobruk (253.). But Scherman also states that not only the winners should write the history, and the small other forces at stake should be also considered, when we establish a picture of a certain event in World history. Thus, the idea to revisit a Division in the Second World War from South Africa makes this book very valuable. Accordingly, I can only recommend the work to ordinary and academic readers as well, since its original and multi-source approach makes it worthwhile to read for anyone who is interested in the history of Africa or in the Second World War.

Book Review: Palgrave Handbook of Terrorism in Africa¹²

Scott N. Romaniuk³

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.

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