MP-IDSA
Issue Brief

Gulf of Guinea Countries and Terrorism Threat

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Summary

Terrorists are expanding beyond landlocked Sahelian countries and reaching the northern borders of Gulf of Guinea littoral states like Ghana, Togo and Cote d'Ivoire, taking advantage of extant domestic fault lines, poor governance, and security deficit. The international community can help empower government structures to tackle this threat effectively. India has important stakes in West Africa. It could consider extending counter-terrorism training to countries like Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire to help build their capacities as well as engage in tri-lateral cooperation with partners like France or Japan.

Introduction

In May 2022, the West Africa Centre for Counter-Extremism (WACCE) in its West Africa Report assessed that the threat of terrorism from Sahel was spreading towards the Gulf of Guinea coastal states.[1] The West African region has been gaining international attention on account of such factors like coups, exit of external powers like France, role of Russia, among others. The Global Terrorism Index 2022 Report notes that Sahel is home to 'the world's fastest growing and most-deadly terrorist groups'.[2]

West African countries like Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Nigeria are home bases for terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Union for Supporting Islam and Muslims (also known as Jama'a Nusratul-Islam wa al-Muslimin, JNIM), Boko Haram and Islamic State (IS) affiliates like the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). In its key findings, the Global Terrorism Index 2022 Report assessed that JNIM is one of the 'fastest growing terrorist groups globally' having recorded the 'largest increase (approximately 69 per cent) in the number of attacks and deaths in 2021' while, ISWA has been designated as the most lethal group in Sahel having been responsible 'for an average of 15.2 deaths per attack' in Niger.[3]

Security threats in one region spill over into the neighbouring territories or pose significant security issues to neighbouring countries. This is the case in West Africa. The threat of terrorism, earlier confined to landlocked countries like Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, is reaching the northern borders of Gulf of Guinea littoral states like Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Benin and Togo. All these countries have witnessed a rise in terrorist attacks in recent years. Evidently, the terrorists are expanding beyond landlocked Sahelian countries, as brought out in the WACCE Report.[4]

Maritime Security threats in the Gulf of Guinea

Eighteen countries make up the coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea.[5] Gulf of Guinea countries include Africa's largest oil producing countries like Nigeria and Angola;

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[1] Mutaru Mumuni Muqthar, **"The Threat of Violent Extremism to Coastal States: Ghana's Exposure to Violent Extremism"**, West Africa Centre For Counter-Extremism (WACCE)*,* 9 May 2022.

[2] **"Global Terrorism Index 2022: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism"**, Institute for Economics and Peace, March 2022.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote D'Ivoire, Ghana, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of Congo, Democratic

regional powerhouses like Senegal, Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria and Angola; booming economies like Senegal, Benin, Cote D'Ivoire and Togo; as well as relatively poor developing countries like Sierra Leone and Liberia (based on GDP per capita). These countries account for nearly 25 per cent of Africa's maritime traffic, with approximately 20 commercial seaports such as Abidjan (Cote D'Ivoire), Cotonou (Benin), Tema and Takoradi (Ghana) and Lagos (Nigeria).[6] An important shipping zone, the region is a maritime trading hub for oil, gas, fishing and other resources.

For decades now, Gulf of Guinea has been threatened with numerous maritime security threats such as piracy, drug trafficking, armed robbery, illegal fishing, smuggling and human trafficking. Piracy has raised maritime insurance costs and adversely affected shipping costs. The region became a major transit point for illegal drugs from South America to Asia and Europe.

Several efforts have been made at the bilateral, multilateral and regional level to tackle these maritime security threats and the challenges posed by them. On the bilateral front, countries have engaged in information sharing to improve situational awareness and have conducted joint patrols. An example of joint effort at the multilateral level is the partnership forged in June 2022 between the Japanese government, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Nigeria's Martin Luther Agwai International Leadership and Peacekeeping Centre (MLAILPKC) in Abuja to organise an Anti-Piracy training course and conduct research on reducing piracy in order to cut shipping costs.[7]

The maritime route through Gulf of Guinea has high economic importance for regional and international trade and shipping. The regional organisations working on the security issues of Gulf of Guinea include the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). African Union (AU) and GGC have conducted joint patrols, providing training support, have encouraged information sharing and held sessions discussing the maritime security threats facing the Gulf of Guinea and consequentially to its littoral countries. In these discussions, though, terrorism was not the prime focus on the horizon.

Republic of the Congo (DRC), Angola and the island nations of Sao Tome and Principe, and Cabo Verde.

[6] Calota Ahrens Teixeira and Jaime Nogueira Pinto, **"Maritime Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea"**, GIS, 28 March 2022.

[7] Faruk Shuaibu, **"Japan, UN Partner Nigeria to Secure Gulf of Guinea"**, *Daily Trust*, 8 June 2022.

Terrorism in the Gulf of Guinea

Over the past decade, the security situation in West Africa has become fragile and complex with the interplay of terrorist groups, insurgent camps and criminal networks. Terrorist outfits such as the JNIM, ISGS and Al-Qaida affiliates including the AQIM have increasingly solidified their presence in the region. This has been further exacerbated with the military coups in Mali and Burkina Faso, withdrawal of French anti-terrorism force and the breakdown of the G5 Sahel, amongst other factors.

According to reports, 264 terrorist attacks resulting in 745 deaths were recorded in West Africa during July–September 2022.[8] The relatively peaceful coastal country of Ghana has seen a rise in terrorist attacks and activity on its norther frontier. In 2019, the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) identified 189 unofficial entry points on Ghana's border with Burkina Faso.[9] In fact, northern Ghana has become an 'ideal fall-back zone' for the armed groups of ISGS and the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM) which has established itself in the Cascades region since 2021. The cell phones of jihadists arrested by French forces of the 'Barkhane Operation' were found to be Ghanaian numbers of area code 233.[10]

The threat of northern Ghana territory becoming a fertile ground for terrorists is real as it also holds vulnerabilities such as unresolved ethnic tensions, unmotorable roads, inadequate educational and healthcare facilities, lack of drinking water and a high unemployment rate among the youth.[11] While measures are being taken to tackle these deficits, it seems inadequate. In 2021, before he detonated a suicide bomb on the French Reconnaissance camp in Mali, a JNIM suicide bomber from Ghana recorded a video calling for his countrymen to fight against the State of Ghana and take up arms.[12] These incidents shed light on the potential ethnic dimension of the extremist threat in Ghana as well as the increase of recruits from Ghana by terrorist outfits of JNIM.

Reports indicate there is a stark increase in terror incidents in northern parts of Togo as well. Another littoral country exposed to the risk of terrorism is Cote d'Ivoire. Its first terrorist attack, the 'Grand-Bassam attack' which killed at least 19 people, took place in March 2016. Ever since, albeit slowly, the threat of terrorism in the country has been increasing. Terrorist outfits including the Movement for Oneness and Jihad

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[8] Kent Mensah, **"West African Countries Meet Over Spillover of Terrorism from Sahel Region"**, Voice of America (VOA), 17 November 2022.

[9] Marine Jeannin, **"Ghana Worries About Rise of Terrorist Threat in Gulf of Guinea"**, Le Monde, 7 June 2022.

[10] Mutaru Mumuni Muqthar, **"The Threat of Violent Extremism to Coastal States: Ghana's Exposure to Violent Extremism"**, no. 1.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

in West Africa (MOJWA) have in recent years, increasingly recruited youth from the Gulf of Guinea littorals such as Benin, Ghana and Guinea.

Terrorist groups take advantage of domestic conflicts between communities, poor governance, and deficit in security. Essentially, it is the northern regions of these countries and eastern region in the case of Guinea which are at risk. If the border populations are displeased, then in all likelihood, terror outfits use such loopholes by gaining the trust of the populace and eventually establish control over the territory.

Extremist groups thrive on insurgency, grievance of the population against the government, as well as lack of economic opportunities and livelihood resources. Terrorism seeps through existing criminal networks and organised crime syndicates of drug trafficking, human trafficking and illegal smuggling. In this context, it would not be far-fetched to foresee that the piracy groups and criminal syndicates operating in the Gulf of Guinea would build linkages with the terrorist camps as they edge closer towards the coast.

The threat of terrorism to the Gulf of Guinea countries has now been officially recognised and efforts are being made to counter the same. For instance, the November 2022 report of the UN Secretary General on 'Situation of piracy and armed robbery at sea in the Gulf of Guinea and its underlying causes' assessed the possible linkages of the illegal networks in the Gulf of Guinea and terrorism in West Africa, Central Africa and Sahel.[13] It concluded that no empirical evidences could be found to confirm any such linkages. Additionally, it stated that the terrorist camps in Sahel had not developed the capabilities to establish presence in the coastal areas.

While the threat of terrorism to littoral countries of the Gulf of Guinea is real, especially in recent years where they have been victims of terrorist attacks and activities, the potential for linkages between the piracy groups and terror camps of West Africa, as mentioned in the UN report, exist. The threat of maritime terrorism in the region cannot be completely ruled out. The international community must address this issue pre-emptively.

Factors driving radicalism in the West African region must be addressed. Besides enabling and strengthening the security architectures in the region, the population needs to be made resilient and government structures need to be empowered. International aid must not be solely militarily driven or focused on counter-terrorism. It is clear that such aid yields limited success. A classic case in point is Mali and the former G5 Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger).

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[13] **"Report of the Secretary-General"**, United Nations Security Council, 1 November 2022.

Mali withdrew from the G5 Sahel Force undermining counter-terrorism efforts in the region. In the last decade, despite increased international presence and military support by several international and regional actors, the crisis has only exacerbated. This is because the core issue in West Africa is not terrorism or Islamist militancy as is often made out to be. The fundamental issues are poor governance, exacerbated by socio-economic inequalities. International aid must have a laser focus on empowering local government structures and enhancing the living conditions of the people. Once these socio-economic and structural vulnerabilities are addressed, the entry points to these terrorist groups would be greatly curtailed.

India and the Gulf of Guinea Countries

India has long-standing good ties with several countries in the Gulf of Guinea. It is often misconstrued that India focuses solely on the Indian Ocean Region littoral countries; however, India's approach towards Africa has diversified and it has actively engaged with nearly all regions of Africa in recent years. In fact, in 2022, the majority of high-level visits to the region from India were towards Central and West African countries. These include visits by Vice President Venkaiah Naidu (who visited Senegal and Gabon in May and June 2022) and by Minister of State (MoS) for External Affairs V. Muraleedharan, who visited Nigeria (August 2022) and Senegal (October 2022).

In September 2022, INS Tarkash undertook its maiden anti-piracy deployment in the Gulf of Guinea.[14] It called at the ports of Dakar in Senegal, Lome in Togo, Lagos in Nigeria and Gentil in Gabon. The deployment included anti-piracy patrols, joint maritime exercises with regional navies including the Nigerian Navy and capacity-building activities such as training in firefighting, damage control, medial aspects and casualty evacuations.

In October 2022, MoS Muraleedharan participated in the eighth edition of the Dakar International Forum on Peace and Security. It was the first time India participated in the Forum at a ministerial level signalling the growing importance accorded to development, peace and security issues concerning Africa.[15] In his address, the MoS reiterated India's strong support for Africa's development priorities and commitment

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[14] **"INS Tarkash Mission Deployed in Gulf of Guinea"**, Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 15 September 2022.

[15] **"Visit of Minister of State for External Affairs Shri V. Muraleedharan to the Republic of Senegal (October 24-25, 2022)"**, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 22 October 2022.

to an Africa-led, Africa-owned model of development. On the sidelines of the Forum, he met the Foreign Ministers of various countries including The Gambia and Mali.

India has important stakes in West Africa as the region is an energy partner for India's security needs. There is a significant number of Indian diaspora in these countries especially Nigeria, Senegal and Ghana. At present, India's cooperation with Gulf of Guinea countries is largely focused on sectors like agriculture, information sharing, infrastructure development, natural resources and Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) slots. India has good defence ties with Benin. However, India could consider extending counter-terrorism training to other countries like Ghana and Cote'd Ivoire to help build their capacities to tackle the danger of terrorism.

There is also scope for trilateral cooperation with countries like France. Albeit, India would need to assess the feasibility of the step, given public displeasure with France. However, it would be in the best interest of the region that India seeks trilateral collaboration either with outside powers or with the regional powers. An ideal partner perhaps for India to collaborate with in the region is Japan. In June 2022, Japan extended a grant aid of US$ 2.78 million to Nigeria for 'The Project for Economic and Social Development Programme (High Speed Boat to reinforce service for coastal security in Nigeria)'.[16] The high-speed boats would be handed over to the Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA). In October 2022, in Abuja, Japan provided counter-piracy training for three weeks. India and Japan share close ties and have collaborated earlier in foreign development projects. Exploring opportunities to collaborate in supporting the regional countries to deal with the threats facing Gulf of Guinea would be a mutually beneficial venture.

Conclusion

The threat of terrorism in West Africa must be addressed adequately by the international community. Regional countries could come together and the international community could support their efforts. The threat of terrorism is moving southwards towards the Gulf of Guinea countries. There exists scope for India to assess the situation and support these countries in dealing with the threat that is edging closer to their doorstep.

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[16] **"Japan Extends a Grant Aid of USD 2.78 Million for Economic and Social Development Programme in Nigeria (High-Speed Boat to Reinforce Service for Coastal Security in Nigeria)"**, Embassy of Japan in Nigeria, 27 June 2022.

About the Author

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