# Asian Resonance

# Violent Extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa (A Probe into the Colonial Strategies and Beyond)

## Abstract

Recently a series of terrorist attacks in the French-speaking West African countries notably in the Sahel region have alarmed the African heads of states as well as the international organisations such as UNO. While talking of the deteriorating law and order conditions of the region that is becoming a preferred hub for anti-social activities such as drugs and human trafficking, mafia activities with a rise in the acts of human rights violations amounting to violent extremism, they showed their concern regarding the Middle East terrorist networks likely to have a spill over in this region in the near future as well. The emphasis was laid on the preventive actions so as to generate positive growth impetus by providing education and jobs for the youth as well as combating terrorism. The paper delves on some of these recent discourses on the subject of radicalisation of the population. It also asks questions regarding the source of these problems and the part played in this by the European colonial strategies which actually shaped the present African polity. Much of Africa has been parcelled out by the imperialist powers by 1898 and the notorious "Françafrique" put to place, for instance, at the cost of the local populations.

## Introduction

The paper wishes to throw light on the violent extremism in Sub-Saharan or West Africa, in particular in the Sahel zone (Morocco, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso) that is French speaking or francophone region. Francophone Africa today faces security challenge that is conducive to extremist acts constituting terrorism. The Sahel-Saharan belt is considered as 'the largest zone of instability and lawlessness of the planet' (see Gourdan Patrice "Al Qaida in the Sahara and the Sahel. Understanding of a complex threat" The Geopolitical Review. March 11, 2012. Diploweb.com). Due to lack of effective state control extremist organizations have expanded their ambitions, capacities, and geographical reach into the Sahel and West Africa, extending an Arc of Instability across this area of strategic interest. In fact, this area is invaded by numerous and diverse groups: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Group for the Support of Islam and the Muslims the Nigerian sect, Boko Haram and the Islamic State in the great Sahara (EIGS), the last avatar. The paper draws from field-based and scholarly research works that examined the evolution of extremist organizations in the Sahel, the political and structural drivers of extremist groups in the region, the economic landscape in which they operate, and efforts by regional governments and their international partners to defeat them. At the same time it would like to understand the source of this evil by analyzing the colonialist and imperialist situations that befell Africa.

In recent years, one witnesses the proliferation of terrorist acts. In Mali, for example, the attack on Radisson Blue at Bamako (November 20, 2015), Gao (January 18, 2017) and Kangaba (June 18, 2017). In Burkina Faso the attack of January 2016 perpetrated by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) at Café Capuchino and more recently, that of 13 August 2017. As they come under increasing pressure from French and regional security forces, uncertainty looms large in their future evolution but they have proven time and again their ability to adapt and rebound in the face of previous setbacks. The sub-Saharan African threats are widespread, sophisticated, and complicated to address. Three distinct, multistate areas now play host to violent extremist groups with regional ties, as well as

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some with connections to ISIS and al-Qaeda. These areas include the Sahel (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Mourabitun, and Ansar al-Dine); the Lake Chad Basin (Boko Haram); and the Horn of Africa/Somalia (al-Shabaab). Dozens of local armed groups operate among them. All three areas began with groups promoting mostly locally contained, pragmatic agendas. They have now spread into more regional, ideologically oriented movements. At various points, these groups gained control of significant territory and dominated licit and illicit trade. Al-Shabaab controlled the southern half of Somalia, funding itself through taxation and the charcoal trade. AQIM and Ansar al-Dine seized northern Mali where trafficking in consumer goods, humans, drugs, and wildlife are rife. Boko Haram erupted across three northern Nigerian States, sustaining itself through kidnapping, trafficking, and a still-nebulous network of local and regional supporters. All of these groups took advantage of ungoverned or poorly governed areas, imposing their own harsh form of control. From there, they have expanded internationally, drawing inspiration (and in some places, technical and tactical support) from ISIS and al-Qaeda. Boko Haram, for example, has greatly improved its media skills with assistance from ISIS technical experts. These advances have not gone unnoticed, and regional forces have responded. Kenya is attempting to root out al-Shabaab militants, following attacks on the Westgate shopping mall and Garissa University. Nigerian government has vowed to identify and curb regional and domestic sources of supply and funding for Boko Haram. And recently, more concerted Nigerian efforts, supported by South African contractors and neighboring forces, have pushed Boko Haram out of towns and into camps scattered across the region. In the Sahel, French and African Union forces (notably from Chad) dispersed militants who controlled the northern half of the country in 2012. But today, violence extends across much of Mali and over the border into the Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and Niger. With U.S. interests threatened in the Middle East, many wonder if America can afford to mount a similar campaign in a region with fewer priorities and threats. But this concern is unfounded. The groups in question do not possess the sophistication of ISIS. But they are operating in a much more permissive environment where capacities are low and where corruption is high. The many factors leading to radicalization remain in place, so recruitment potential is elevated. The region remains susceptible to greater instability and violence.

"It must be recognized that this phenomenon (violent extremism) is not the result of chance. When human rights are flouted, good governance has no place and aspirations are trampled on, speeches that focus on the grounds of discontent and injustice - or the feeling of injustice - and promise empowerment and the advent of radical changes become alluring. "(Report of the Secretary General of the United Nations Organization on a Plan of Action for the Prevention of Violent Extremism)

This is the report of the Secretary General of the United Nations Organization for the Prevention of Violent Extremism. The present communication also believes this radicalisation of the population as not to be a random happening or a "result of chance." So a study of West Africa's colonization and post-colonization situation needed to be fore grounded in any analysis of extremism violence. According to critics, colonization reshaped the whole structure of the African life economically, socially, philosophically and politically and its legacy is the problems of today. Africans are failing to contend with their realities because the system was designed by the colonial authorities who had used the Africans for the white settler's elevation.

Many argue that Africa had a rich pre-colonization period and the fact that the Europeans taught them to read and write was dismissed by them to the effect that Africa had its rich oral traditions and there was no need for writing. The West Africa region had 'griots', wandering human encyclopaedias who were capable of recalling events and exploits by heroes. They were the custodians of history. Ethiopia even had poetic forms such as the Qene and Mawandes as early as 1BC, predating Christianity and Islam, nullifying the possibility of having been taught so by missionaries. *In Indaba My Children, Credo Mutwa* says the Bantu of Southern Africa had a language of symbols similar to the Egyptian hieroglyphs. The wandering nomads of Southern Africa, or 'bushmen' also left cave paintings which tell stories of hunts revealing their diets, hunting methods and preferred prey among other cultural practices in pictograms. It is safe to conclude that had they a greater need to communicate or record in writing, they were capable of evolving their language further, however they were nomadic tribes with no interest in establishing settlements or engaging in commerce. Pythagoras, Aristotle, Picasso, were all beneficiaries of African innovation. Fractal geometry, the binary system, was used in Africa before the West got a conception of them.

However, with colonization Europeans reframed the territorial boundaries. As early as 1898 Europeans had defined colonies over all western Africa except for the territory left to the Republic of Liberia. Germany, the latecomer, had claimed the 33,000 square miles of Togo (together with the much larger Cameroon territory on the eastern borders of what is usually accepted as western Africa). France and Britain remained, as before, the main imperial powers. The political boundaries established by the Europeans by 1898 (although surveyed or demarcated on the ground much later) largely determine the political map of western Africa today. The only subsequent change of significance followed the British and French conquests of the German colonies during World War I (1914–18). While the larger parts of both Togo and Cameroon were entrusted by the League of Nations to the French to administer as separate colonies, in each case a smaller western part was entrusted to Britain to be administered together with the Gold Coast and

Nigeria respectively. Ultimately British Togo chose to join with the Gold Coast and so became part of the new independent Ghana. The northern part of British Cameroon similarly joined with Nigeria, but the southern part chose instead to federate with the former French Cameroon. This territorialisation of the West African countries by which often the rival ethnic groups were made to live together often led to ceaseless civil wars and genocides which continue even to this day leading to chaotic unstable situations.

The emergence of the pro-African leaders groomed in European education and customs was another social phenomenon detrimental to the interest of countrymen. In francophone Africa this led to the rise of collaborators, the notorious 'Françafrique' chain that is still alive. It denotes 60 years of exertion of influence by France over its former colonies to favour its own interests. For instance, Burkina Faso won independence from France in 1960, but the ties have never been completely severed. The term is now often used to criticise the allegedly neocolonial relationship France has with its former colonies in Africa. Since the independence of African states in 1960, France has intervened militarily more than 30 times in the continent. France has military bases in Gabon, Senegaland Djibouti, as well as in its overseas departments of Mayotte and Réunion in the Indian Ocean.The French Army is also deployed in Mali, Chad, Central African Republic, Somalia and Ivory Coast. Françafrique was at its height from 1960 to 1989.

François-Xavier Verschave in1999 also criticized in his book on the French policies of Africa, *La Françafrique, le plus long scandale de la République.(Francafrique, the long scandal of the Republic).* He denounced the many concealed bonds between France and Africa and later referred to Françafrique as "the secret criminality in the upper echelons of French politics and economy, where a kind of underground Republic is hidden from view". He said that it also means "France à fric" (fric is a slang word for "cash"), and that "Over the course of four decades, hundreds of thousands of euros misappropriated from debt, aid, oil, and cocoa or drained through French importing monopolies, have financed French political-business networks (all of them offshoots of the main neo-Gaullist network), shareholders' dividends, the secret services' major operations and mercenary expeditions.

**All these Factors**

Lack of desirable economic growth, low job opportunities, poverty, lack of education and bad governance made West Africa prone to lawlessness leading to the growth of mafia networks that are active in indoctrinating the hapless and helpless youth into extremism.

Together with this, a growing concern, according to the researchers, is that changes across the Middle East could hasten the movement of fighters to other areas with ongoing conflicts, safe havens, and like-minded groups. Libya has long meddled in sub-Saharan Africa via its long, porous southern border, through which ISIS may infiltrate into

the Sub-Saharan region. Many foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq hail from African countries, and could well make their way to a new battlefield—fortifying existing groups. ISIS has also called on its followers to attack in place if they cannot reach their self-declared Caliphate. That sub-Saharan Africa could be the next center of gravity for jihadist violence is a real possibility. Any such migration southward by these violent extremists would bring them to countries ill-equipped to handle them. With extremist violence already high, the arrival of battle-hardened fighters from the Middle East would devastate sub-Saharan Africa. But on top of interests in safeguarding human rights in the region, nations such as Nigeria and Kenya serve as strategic hubs, and drive growth on the continent. America increasingly relies on them militarily, economically, and politically. The United States, according to CSIS, should redouble its efforts to prevent sub-Saharan Africa from serving as a place for violent extremists to regroup, exchange ideas, refine technical capacities, and organize. Essential activities include greater border control; hard-nosed diplomacy to stimulate host-nation action; improved and expanded training, equipping, and coordinating of regional forces; extensive programming in countering violent extremism; enhanced intelligence sharing; and economic-development programs to provide youth with a positive future that for many seems out of reach.

As regards state policies, most Sahelo-Saharan countries do not control their entire territory. As a result, these areas are the playground for all kinds of weapons, drugs, human beings, money laundering, etc. This promotes the expansion of terrorism. In addition, the socio-economic situation of certain areas also contributes to violent extremism. Indeed, if "radicalism and terrorism find followers, it is also due to the facts that they are in search of better living conditions" (see "in the eye of the cyclone" Niger facing extremism and Terrorism, "Report on Peace and Security in the ECOWAS Area, Issue 7 September 2013). Terrorists take advantage of the absence of the state in these poor areas characterized by lack of infrastructure, basic social services, youth unemployment but also in some areas of ethnic, religious, political, socio-economic discrimination to exploit resentment and despair and thus recruit as many supporters as possible. For example, the economic, political and community marginalization and non-correct application of the various agreements between the Malian government and the Tuareg rebels led them to join jihadist groups, Ansar Dine and AQIM, resulting in a major insurgency in the country north in 2012.

Regarding the impact of foreign policies, we can note the Arab influence. Indeed, according to Bakary Sambe, founder of the Observatory of Radicals and Religious Conflict in Africa (ORCRA), particularly through Islam, connections are facilitated. Arab missionaries very early succeeded in establishing currents of thought or theological schools, the most radical of which constitute Wahhabism and Salafism, and terrorist groups exploit

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the existence of these movements with ideological relays to legitimize their actions and make certain people adhere to them to their claim. In addition, Western and American foreign policy, especially in the field of security, for example the 2011 military intervention in Libya under the auspices of the United Nations, the Serval operations and, more recently, Barkhane for the restoration of the order in northern Mali is often perceived by extremist elements as an aggression made by the enemy, which explains why France is since 2013, the western country most targeted by jihadists.

In the fight against terrorism, initiatives have been implemented not only at the national level, but also with the strengthening of military capabilities, the intelligence apparatus and the legal framework, as well as at the sub regional, regional and international levels. At the international level, there is the Executive Directorate of the Counter-Terrorism Committee (DECT), the United Nations Security Council, the UNODC Terrorism Prevention Branch (SPT), the 19 universal legal instruments for combating terrorism. terrorism as well as relevant UN Security Council resolutions, the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, and more recently the UN Secretary General's Action Plan for the Prevention of Violent Extremism etc.

Unlike the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which had largely focused on the implementation of the second pillar measures of 'preventing and combating terrorism', the Secretary-General in his plan of action prioritizing preventive measures to combat violent extremism, in particular by re-launching measures under the first and fourth pillars, "to eliminate the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism and to ensure respect for human rights for and the rule of law in the fight against terrorism, which ensures a more comprehensive implementation of the strategy, taking into account the lessons learned from the experience of the past decade and possible future challenges. .

At regional level, the 1999 Algiers Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism was formed to combat violent terrorism. The groups in question do not possess the sophistication of ISIS. But they are operating in a much more permissive environment where capacities are low and where corruption is high. The many factors leading to radicalization remain in place, so recruitment potential is elevated. The region remains susceptible to greater instability and violence.

Secretary-Generalof UNO Ban Ki-moon's Special Envoy for the Sahel, Hiroute Guebre Sellassie, said, citing recent terrorist attacks from Bamako, Cameroon, Nigeria, Paris and Lebanon to the downing of a Russian plane over Egypt: "It is very alarming that youth and women in the Sahel, who constitute a vast majority of the population, are the targets of recruitment into radical movements. Up to 41 million youth under 25 years of age in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger alone face hopelessness and are at risk of radicalization or migration," she added citing terrorists among its tens

of millions of disadvantaged people as : "If nothing is done to improve access to education, increase employment and integration opportunities for the youth, the Sahel, I am afraid, will become a hub of mass migration, and of recruitment and training of terrorist groups and individuals, which, as you know, will ultimately have grave consequences for global peace and security."

She noted that only 56 per cent of Sahel children have access to primary education, and only 36 per cent of the population can read and write. "This unsustainable vicious cycle can only worsen without a strong international assistance," she stressed. "The fight against terrorism requires international solidarity. Global partnerships in the fight against terrorism are no more an option but an imperative for survival."

Drug traffickers are increasingly colluding with armed groups and terrorist movements which grant them safe passage in exchange for financial benefits. "If conflicts are to be prevented in the Sahel, illicit trafficking, including of drugs, weapons and humans should be stopped," she said.

She cited governance problems, noting that important segments of the populations are denied meaningful political participation, while communities' resilience is falling victim to extreme environmental degradation, repeated climate shocks, and demographic trends which together are pushing millions of people on the brink of humanitarian disaster.

On the positive side, Ms. Sellassie said the Sahel has continued to receive the sustained attention of the international community, the countries themselves have taken greater leadership and ownership of initiatives addressing regional challenges, and UN entities have improved coordination and coherence in implementing an integrated strategy.

"I would urge the Security Council to fully use existing mechanisms and expand their mandates to better monitor, report on and prevent the trafficking of drugs in the Sahel region. This trade finances terror and instability, and must be choked if our efforts are to be successful," she concluded.

"Finally, I encourage the international community to enhance its support to the United Nations and regional organizations in addressing cross cutting and trans-boundary issues. Together, we can prevent further deterioration of the situation in the Sahel."

**Conclusion**

To conclude we may say that violent extremism or radicalization is a process that starts with some kind of alienation, isolation or depression. If the factors promoting such negative impulse in the society could be identified and checked, then solutions are not far away. Various intermediaries working on many different levels and employing different platforms including social media also boost extremist activities and measures are to be taken to mitigate their influences. What is, actually required, is a comprehensive approach based on in-depth research as there is no single profile and as profiles

shift over time and they are becoming more diverse in the African context. However the positive thing that is happening is that more and more research centres and international bodies are getting themselves involved in a big away to curb violent extremism and to provide solutions to this global menace.

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